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**MY LOVE, SHE'S BUT A LASSIE.**

**VOL. II.**



# MY LOVE, SHE'S BUT A LASSIE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"QUEENIE."

"Like to the grass that's newly sprung,  
Or like a tale that's new begun,  
Or like the bird that's here to-day,  
Or like the pearled dew of May:

E'en such is man; who lives by breath,  
Is here, now there, in life, and death—  
The grass withers, the tale is ended;  
The bird is flown, the dew's ascended."

SIMON WASTELL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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# MY LOVE, SHE'S BUT A LASSIE.

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## CHAPTER I.

“ Well could he ride, and often men would say,  
*That horse his mettle from his rider takes ;*  
*Proud of subjection, noble by the sway,*  
*What rounds, what bounds, what course, what stop he makes !*  
And controversy hence a question takes,  
Whether the horse by him became his deed,  
Or he his manage by the well-doing steed.”

SHAKESPEARE.

IT was a pleasant Autumn morning, whose peaceful, sunny warmth, seemed befitting the calm aging of the year. Somehow Mrs. Lester felt it in unison with her feelings as she sat, resting herself, on a seat over upon the common ; Mab being, as usual, on the grass at her feet.

Though she had risen late, she already felt gently wearied. Strange feelings too came over her while sitting there a speck upon the Stray; with sky and wind seeming to be all around her; and a sense as if those far bright houses with their railings and trees bounding her view were happy homes, never to be nearer than the horizon of such as she—alone on a common. She knew in a room she could have busied herself and banished such fancies; but out here her thoughts had to stray into vagueness. This fair woman had never been good at thinking, or reasoning with herself very clearly; only for such qualities as loving others, endurance, and patient unselfishness, she was unrivalled. Life had been calm, warmly and uneventfully grey to her since that past girlhood; greyer and quieter during her first widowhood. Then—why not?—vague wonders and half-formed tender musings had arisen within her mind; for even in her comfortable seclusion the name of her for-

mer lover, and reports that he would never marry, had reached her. Hardly thinking it likely they should ever meet again, she had yet wondered; romanced a little. Brighter colours might still tinge her existence, even should they two not meet till much nearer the descent of life's hill. But now—she knew that was a mistake, and life must always be grey for her!

She looked suddenly down at Mab, who, her hands lightly clasped over one knee and her head half hidden by a large straw hat, was deeply thinking. Active in mind as in body, that little philosopher had the rare gift of putting at one moment all her energies into action; the next suddenly imposing quiet upon her corporeal nature, while her whole powers exerted themselves in thought.

“How you are changing, my sweet sixteen! I came to see a wild little country child, and I find almost a grown maiden, who has been thinking,—thinking there:

far more profoundly than ever I could." \*

She spoke playfully, half wishful of gently drawing out the child's secret. She knew so well what spell had caused the change.

"Oh, Maud, but you always said I used to think often, even when I was quite little."

"Yes, dear, but differently. You used to dream in a wide-eyed fashion ; now you think, and with a little frown at times."

"Because I am older—because there are real things in life to puzzle over, instead of dreaming as I used to do."

What had just then been in her mind was a geological question, abstruse enough to her sleepy brain when she had wakened up at six that morning to study Wat's books in bed. First she had thought of asking his help during the day ; then she had resolved to solve it for herself—perhaps, if her old courage would return to her, tell him all about it. She could fancy so well the pleased look there would formerly have been in his light-blue eyes, and the way

that scar would have wrinkled oddly while he smiled and looked down at her. Again her thoughts wandered to seven that morning, when hearty Juliana had made her way in with a breath of morning mist on her clothes. Seating herself on the little white bed, she had scolded Mab for being lazy, then disinterred the hidden volume from beneath her pillow, laughing at the dry-looking pages. (They were the whole outcome, and typical representation, of some great mind, as its leaves are of a plant. And likewise a little bee meant to extract therefrom honey of knowledge). Last, July imparted a great project to her little friend, which Mrs. Lester must hear. Again Mabel's thoughts had wandered, led still further from the stone age to that of her own fair little flesh and blood form.

Sweet sixteen, Maud had called her ; and Maud herself was married at eighteen ! She fell to wondering—naughty little Goldenlocks—what sort of husband she should

like to have. Not for now. How could she be so conceited as to go before Maud even in imagination? Nineteen or twenty, or even that far-off time when she should be of age, ought to be good enough for her. Still—she did wish she was grown-up, and come out, and eighteen!

Heigho! There were Colonel Cust's horses being led to the door of the hotel; she could recognise them. One, the quiet, handsome brown she had seen him ride before. The other a bright thoroughbred chestnut with four white stockings and a crooked blaze on its forehead, coming shying and coquetting skittishly along, as if uncertain whether rearing or kicking viciously would best suit its inclination—oh! what would she not give to be on that beauty! The Colonel had said in her hearing he only knew one man there who could ride the horse properly. Who could that be?—why, Wat Huntley!

She strained her eyes, and her cheeks

flushed as they rode out and passed by. How well he rode! She could see the trouble the brute was giving him; see even the wicked flash of its eyes and the gleam of white. Yes, he *did* look well on horse-back. She felt quite a glow of pride in watching her ugly friend; superiority in anything manly has such an influence on the feminine mind.

"What a contrast they make!" said Maud, softly smiling, yet looking away over the other's head with a sigh. "The one so stately and handsome, the other——"

"As ugly as sin!" put in Mab, with a suddenness that half-shocked her elder.

"And as good as a saint; and far pleasanter than some I have read about," she thought to herself, her sister's words having roused an evil mood within her. "After all I should not like the handsome husband! Better somebody that nobody broke their heart about but myself: that was pleasant to me, if not to all the world."

She pushed back her flapping hat, watching the figures receding over the hill-brow in a canter, and unwittingly gave a little sigh, for before Maud habit had never inspired unconscious self-control. Then it struck her now was the time to make her great request; and plucking up courage she began. She felt sadly like a base little mortal, ashamed of making some very earthly request to a calm great goddess. Yet this was no cold, steelblue-eyed Minerva, but rather a sweet, deep-bosomed Ceres, smiling on all around her.

"There is to be a dance in the house to-night," she observed, staring hard at the sky. "How delightful for the lucky girls who *can* go to it!"

"My dear, I hardly think so. Here!—so different from dances among one's own set."

"Ah! But perhaps I shall never be at any," and the look in the little minx's eyes would have moved a statue to smile. Mrs.



Lester fairly laughed. . "And Miss Higgins came so early this morning to tell me, and say how much everybody wished I might come. She was sure Colonel Cust would like it very much ; and—Captain Huntley."

Like ladies' postscripts, this latter name meant most. For Juliana was a friend of Wat's, who indeed had said as much about the dance to her ; and little Mab was glad in her very heart.

"Colonel Cust wished it." Poor soul, that moved the widowed sister so terribly. Already, with such short preparation for this trial, she had forced herself to take entire charge of Mabel : the day before had not alone allowed, but even manœuvred, that she should be with Cust. Was she right ? But she only longed for the worst to be soon over : then she might go away home. It had not even been possible for her to glide away and not see it all, even for a minute, for Madame, under various pleas, was keeping strict seclusion in her own rooms, and having

begged her dear Mrs. Lester to watch over Mabel, seemed to have given up all charge of the girl. She even dined alone with her old husband, and was supposed to be devoting herself to him night and day. Certainly even Mabel since these last few days had hardly seen either.

"You know, Mabel, it is not for me to give you any permission," said poor Mrs. Lester, speaking as cheerfully as she could.

"But, Maud—dear Maud—only think that Madame said, 'yes, with pleasure,' if you will take me! Can you believe it? Juliana sent her a little note, and to my dismay she came straight into my room; but she only said, with a sweet smile, I was welcome to go, as she understood Colonel Cust wished for me. I felt so stupid with surprise that I stared! It is strange, yet I do verily believe, were he to ask me to take a ramble along the house-roofs to study the stars, she would allow it!" Mab had lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper. "Can you

understand it. And why is she so kind again, like her old self?"

But Mrs. Lester could offer no explanation; only she spoke of forgiveness if Madame were really changing—ay! and even if not; though she would doubt no one—being herself the simplest of good, innocent women. And Mab gravely listened; sometimes frowning, sometimes petulant, yet at last nodding her head. By then Mrs. Lester remembered to say that, as Madame and everyone else wished it, she would look after Mab that night at the dance. At that the girl jumping up kissed her vehemently, dancing away to tell the glad news to Juliana and Agnes Hitchcocks.

## CHAPTER II.

"O fools! (said I) thus to prefer dark night  
 Before true light;  
 To live in grots and caves, and hate the day  
 Because it shows the way—  
 The way which from this dead and dark abode  
 Leads up to God!"

HENRY VAUGHAN.

**M**EANWHILE, behind her locked door,  
 Madame was lost in deep thought,  
 for this morning was of weighty importance  
 to her. She had her whole future—and that  
 of her step-daughter also—to decide, and that  
 without other counsel than her own. She  
 was walking up and down the length of the  
 room from window to door; backwards and  
 forwards, backwards and forwards again;  
 going swiftly but almost noiselessly with a

feline footfall. She also kept whispering excitedly to herself, her face paling and flushing by turns, and her large red fingers—chilblained as ever—clutching at times nervously a letter in her hand.

It was not unusual for her to work off excitement after this fashion; for she was capable of violent emotions, though she had also wonderful power in concealing them. But the very second nature of her self-control made it almost impossible to vent her feelings otherwise than cautiously, even when alone. The pent-up steam escaped in silence! Though she had a passionate dream (whose fulfilment was ever relegated to a still more distant future) of that time when she should dare to shatter these restraints and horrify the society she hated by fiercely displaying the red embers smouldering in her heart—the bloody freedom to be won! the wide, universal communism!—the abhorrence of present social tyranny, styled customs and morals!

Again she looked at the letter ; a French one : for days past she had watched in vain for it, tremulously as a girl for her first love-message. A bold enough scrawl, though in a Frenchman's handwriting ; on vile paper, whose odour was inseparably connected with cheap cigars and brandy and water. For the fourth or fifth time she read it with eager, hungry eyes.

“My very dear——” (Here some name beginning with A had evidently been scratched out, and “Cousin” substituted,—“Let me tell you a fable. Once a poor gipsy was forsaken by her family ; duped by him who bore to her the most sacred relationship of father. Did none succour her ? Some did. Those of her tribe.

“For years she came to them as fortune frowned ; ate of their bread, drank of their cup,—then left them as the goddess smiled. At last came a change to the wanderer—for houses and lands, lackeys, soft clothing,

and kings' repasts were hers! Did she remember her tribe, who wandered by day, and camped at night under the stars of the wind-blown sky, or the fogs of heavy atmospheres? She forgot them!

"At last came a day when the great lady wanted humble help—in despair she turned to her tribe once more. They forgot all! They gave it!

"My cousin, I draw no parallel.

"Your letter had to follow me to London from Brussels. Raoul is still there with our old mother; for me, sacred interests, and perhaps some small reasons of personal safety, required my presence in these Isles. It is now two years since you thought it prudent to write to me; yet do not imagine Auguste knew not of all your plans—your success. I did. And if I scorned to remind you of all you owed to *us*—shall I own it?—a smile<sup>o</sup> of bitterness curled my lip when I remembered what you once vowed to THE CAUSE! You—you to hug yourself now in

the soft delights you once railed against, and weakly hope, with a woman's feeble deception, that we should never know.

"Be satisfied. I reproach not! The cause demands only willing votaries—yet my heart still whispers you may not be altogether lost to us; may still remember the glorious career that I in secret had destined for you above the mean herd of your kind!

"To business. Bring the old man to London when you can; one line, and I come to help you. Beware of English law!

"You must not be witness, or you receive nothing!

"If it be thought, after death, that he was unsound in mind, or that you unduly influenced him—you may receive nothing!

"If he be *obstinate*, and makes no will, the girl would get the property; you only one-third of the rent and personal belongings for your life!

"Now I advise. Remember the pro-



verb : 'Chi va piano, va sano,' etc., and ask not *too much*. Take—say half,—and be guardian to the girl and trustee—(one who keeps her fortune for her till she comes of age). He is dead—all are satisfied. But, remember, another trustee will be required for form's sake, since these English show little faith in the beauty and perfectness of human nature. They know that it is seldom two will agree together to despoil the orphan; one, alas! might.

"Adieu! Without me you cannot gain the battle. I help. Receive my expressions of devoted affection. Remember the Cause.

"AUGUSTE BLANC."

Again, at the last sentences about the trusteeship, her face flushed a dark, unbecoming red. She understood the saturnine humour in its whole strength so well. Many women, even as cunning, crafty, self-helpful in ingenious shifts as herself, require

the support of a law-giver. He was hers. She bowed before him, impressed by the very brutality of power and coarseness with which he would scatter to the winds at times the petty euphemisms by which she still truckled to public opinion while gaining her ends—would dash aside the flowery baits with which she sought to hide even from her own eyes the pitfall made ready for her victims. And yet again, (when seized with the frenzy of a Frenchman and a demagogue) he would declaim to her upon the glorious unselfishness in their common brotherhood of humanity; chide, upbraided, roused her easily-blazing enthusiasm. Then, bewildered and maddened, ready to abandon all the worldly goods she would clutch greedily at calmer moments, she forgot all the differences between his practices and orations, and adored him as the future leader, prophet, saviour in their cause!

“Ah, he wishes me to go up to London, that he, too, may share in the prey,” she

thought to herself, with sudden suspicion. Then, a moment after : "Why not? Who would use it for a greater end? *Ah, ciel*—such an end!—to sap the very foundations of an empire—a vampire of the earth!"

In a flash her mind imagined the midnight meetings, the mutterings and gatherings of the suppressed storm; then one given day when fire should leap out in the capitals—Paris, London, Vienna in flames! How she would joy to put match to powder herself! Disorder, rout everywhere; save among the avengers of the human race—the lands purified by blood and fire for the beginning of the new and glorious Period of the World.

But time pressed. She had perforce to come back to the meaner considerations of the moment; the money to be secured to gain the future fame and maddening exaltation which should be hers in their great world-commune, when all arbitrary distinctions between the sexes were levelled.

"The old man must sign—bah! he *shall*! Did I sit up with him last night and drop his drops so carefully all for nothing?" (At that moment his weary white head lay on the pillow in the darkened room next door. He slept the sleep of exhaustion after midnight pain.) "Life must be kept in you, *mon cher*, till you can die in peace, knowing your dear wife is provided for," she went on to herself with a cold, grim smile. She knew her power, and the terrible dread he had of that calm, steady gaze, and the forefinger she would hold up so quietly! quietly! *quietly*! before his eyes, till he would at last tremble, and, cowering away, hide his poor old face in his hands.

And yet he was so obstinate—all for sake of that girl! Hard as a nether millstone about the will; and accustomed all his life to suspect and resent all influence of women. How then would it do to *forge his signature*? She paused; but fear did not cause the stop. She did not see her way

clearly, that was all ; and she had risked so much during her life that she preferred safer ways, if these would answer as well.

“At the very worst he could die intestate ! and I should at least have one-third. More than the miserable pittance he has no doubt left his ‘daughter’s governess,’” she thought, with a sneer that raised one side of her upper lip, while her eyes looked back re-assuringly from the reflection in her glass—bluish eyes these were, with brown spots in them. “But it shall not come to the worst. I take only the house and demesne with half the fortune—and nearly five years before me to guard the dear child’s portion ! It is laughably simple . . . And it is right !” she suddenly continued, with a strange self-justification—“right to secure again some of our own heritage from these leagued plundering classes, by any means ; if we have not yet the strength to wrest it bloodily from them by force.”

Again she puzzled over what to do with

Mab in the future, *should she show a disagreeable tenacity to her fortune and life!* Then she put the difficulty away. One step at a time was enough, and expedients were plenty; Auguste would help. Or—was it possible *that* half was the spoil destined for himself?

Her face grew white and pitiless with jealousy, for the longing, never hitherto realized during her life, to have some strong man—any man—a slave at her chariot wheels, had but grown absurdly fiercer with age. Why not Auguste—at last? He should acknowledge that she was necessary to him; her craft, her ingenuity, and the gold and silver these had gained her, which should raise him to a pinnacle of power among his fellow conspirators—she with him! No! Mabel should never balk her; but for awhile—a little while—she must be kind and cautious with the girl, to quiet these hated relations, who would no doubt be suspicious.

“How wise that I dreaded that ugly Huntley; poor unhappy fool, I verily believe he would take her without one sou. So now all applaud me as an excellent step-mother, since, being poor, he must be a fortune-hunter; and Colonel Newland-Cust is such a good *parti*. Saints! how they would stare to hear their good *parti* was—*married already*! Ah! Richard, Richard, I little foresaw this long ago when I used to peep from the window; trembled, watching through those long gambling nights, inside the old carved cabinet, because you!—you! were so near,—all unconscious of my eyes more often upon you than your cards—when I longed for nothing better on this side heaven (if there were such a place) than to be your wife. And now I must hide from your eyes; allow, even manœuvre that you should make love to this red-haired wretch beneath my very sight! Nay! not that: I am unjust. You are too much of a *grand seigneur*, with the scruples and

honour that are appendages of your rank, to go far whilst you have a wife, and believe her to be in—Jersey!

Well; we are all fools. Even I—dared one be sure that this disguise and the alteration of fourteen years were sufficient—could long to enter the lists with her; try once more—force him to like as he would—yes, would have—then; but for that horrible deception! Father, father, I never did forgive you, and I *never* will! . . . I wonder does he ever remember—ever think of me? Bah! What must he think when he remembers how his father-in-law the Marquis proved to be M. Abraham Wolff; and the full joke of what that meant . . . There he goes riding, past on the common. *Ciel!* I could almost throw away all I have gained for the sake of that man yet.”



## CHAPTER III.

“Whether thrallèd or exiled,  
Whether poor or rich thou be,  
Whether praised or reviled,  
Not a rush it is to thee ;  
This nor that thy rest doth win thee,  
But the mind that is within thee.”

GEORGE WITHER.

NIGHT had come, and the dance in the hotel was beginning.

Below the stairs, in a hall where the side passages met, Cust and Huntley lounged, watching guests arrive from lodgings or private houses. The former's handsome face looked dissatisfied and cynical; and in truth he felt ill at ease in heart. Perhaps the sight of one woman had stirred all the unhappy disturbing memories his

mind was capable of; but he told himself not to be a coward and to fight them out. Still he could not conceal his dark moods, and just now glanced in silent envy at "old Wat" beside him, cheery and smiling as usual, with never a line of trouble on his ugly countenance. Poor Wat! Dick Cust never knew till afterwards how hard his friend was trying, even then, to speak and feel no less kindly, give as pleasant a glance as ever, to the man he believed was robbing him of his one ewe-lamb.

Just then Mrs. Lester's figure swept down the stairs. How splendidly handsome she looked in her black trailing robes, though the high, square-cut dress was in itself severely simple; but the twisted coronet of black hair, only fastened by jet stars, looked more regally imposing than diamond tiaras upon many other brows. Neither spoke as they looked. Through Wat's mind passed the thought that her loveliness seemed given to remind poor human im-

perfection of what itself once was meant to possess, and may yet attain unto. So do also, at other moments, other heaven-lent gifts; perfect music, poetry, painting, that song which almost seems to loose the bonds of matter and bear our spirits upwards for a few brief, passionate instants; words spoken by great lips that sound more than human—inspired: all faint, broken reflections of one whole glorious Type, after whose realization generations dimly grope and strain, to find it—somewhere not on earth. This was Maud Lester's beauty; ennobling inwardly to all who saw it.

She passed them, then half turned and spoke Cust's name. He joined her at once.

"Perhaps you know I have promised to let my little sister dance to-night. Indeed I hardly like it—here; but, poor child, no one knows how solitary her life has always been, and one cannot help seeing how soon she may be in sad mourn-

ing . . Still—you will understand, Colonel Cust—I know nothing of these people.”

(Poor beautiful, older woman ! she was so timid lest he should disapprove of what his little child-love did.)

Cust perfectly understood ; he was very glad her little sister was to be so far indulged ; he had some acquaintances here, whom, if Mrs. Lester allowed it, he would bring up to Mabel. That was all, and she quietly thanked him. But his breath came thicker ; the last time, the last time those two had spoken alone together was years ago ; and then—her arms had been around his neck. Now there seemed a gulf between them, across which she quietly spoke, not even raising her eyes ; and his miserable secret weighed heavy on his heart.

Meanwhile, Wat Huntley had seen another dark but little figure coming down the stairs towards him, running, rushing, dancing ; with one light final bound she fairly lit upon the mat at his feet.

"Are you there?" she exclaimed in surprise; then eagerly whispered with a very child's innocent pleasure in a new frock, which all old friends are called upon to admire—"Would you know me to-night? Oh, how delightful it feels to be grown-up!—remember, please, from to-night I am *quite* grown-up. Quick, do tell me how you like my appearance."

"Pretty well."

As he looked down at the floating black cloud round that small-shaped form which set off so wonderfully the soft purity of her milk-white, dimpled shoulders and perfectly curved arms, saw the infantile golden head, the saucy eyes and rose-red mouth slightly turned upward, waiting for approval, something came over him that he dared not say another word, or—he must have spoken foolishness.

"Only pretty well?" she said, with a slightly mortified inflection; but her joy was merely damped for the moment, and she

confidentially added—"It was one of Maud's, and we had to take it in almost every way, except in length—you see, I never had on long skirts before." Then turning her head over her shoulder to contemplate their sweep with fresh delight, "Come! say you like me better in this than in the old holland frock I wore at first—at Birk Crag, you know."

"I would like you just the same no matter what dress you were in."

"You are not nice—not like yourself to-night," she petulantly cried, wilfully misunderstanding him, though her heart beat quicker at the tone. "There is Colonel Cust; perhaps he will pay me some compliments," and with one rustle she was past him and down the dim passage towards their room.

He stood still a moment, then turned in the opposite direction. This night he meant to lose or gain all. But there was little of the joyousness of hope in his brave, patient

face. His heart failed him, for the child was right; she was grown-up—able to choose for herself, and to see the difference between him and such men as handsome Dick Cust. Turning a corner, he came full upon old Mrs. Higgins, who was standing all alone, looking round her with a bewildered air.

“Oh, Captain 'Untley, you can't tell me where Josh is—my boy Josh?” asked the poor stout soul in trembling tones, looking appealingly in his face, as he paused in the passage.

“Your son? Is he not in the dancing-room, Mrs. Higgins?” answered Wat, whose ear caught the sounds of music behind intervening doors.

“No—oh no. My girls are there—enjoying of themselves—time enough for them, poor dears, when trouble does come. But, Lord!—don't mind me—maybe it's not that, but what with telegraphs—and being a stupid old woman—and Mr. H. perhaps

angry with the boy——” The tears fairly came into her eyes.

“Do you mind taking me into your room here and telling me all about it, Mrs. Higgins? I think I can help you,” he gently said.

“Now that is just like you. I always do say there's nobody is such a comfort to talk to, nor such a real gentleman at 'art as you, Captain 'Untley,” she almost sobbed in her gratitude as he kindly led her in. Then putting a chair for her at the end of their large room, looking deserted by the light of one solitary gas-burner, he listened as chivalrously as he would to any younger or lovelier woman. So she told her tale, mopping her eyes spasmodically with a handkerchief grasped tight in one fat hand, while her mountain of clothes swayed and heaved in ludicrous fashion. Mr. H. had left her two days ago on sudden business; she knew he had something on his mind just before he left, when he wouldn't taste his pork



chops. He told her not to bother herself, but "Bless you, Captain 'Untley, 'ow could a wife and a mother help bothering, though she would never trouble the poor young things?" And here was a telegram that Josh must start by the night train. He was in the business, and heaven knew what was wrong, and no one could find him.

Huntley looked at his watch.

"Send down his portmanteau to the train, Mrs. Higgins. I think we'll get him in time."

Five minutes later he was outside under the stars, and walking rapidly down to the town. By mere chance he had overheard a whisper near the bar, of a little party that night in certain lodgings, where, besides the wine, and cards, and smoke, would be more gambling till early dawn on a green cloth marked with numbers, than might agree with the raw lad's experience or finances.

After three-quarters of an hour had elapsed he was seen entering the dancing-

room. People were whirling mazily all round him, and the din of music brayed in his ears as he made his way up to his worthy old friend, whom strangers doubtless thought hopelessly stupid, seeing the vacant way in which her broad, full-mooned visage stared at the crowd.

"It is all right, Mrs. Higgins," he whispered in her ear. "He was only with some friends, and I got him out quietly and told him. We just caught the mail." Then he had disappeared among the groups before she could gasp her thanks.

Making his way he went straight towards a certain couple who had just stopped.

"Miss Langton—are you engaged for the next fast dance?"

"Yes; and for the next, and the next, and the one after that," answered Mab, pettishly, turning away, after one of those strange angry or disdainful gleams out of her dark red-brown eyes he could not understand.

"I am late, I know; but—well, I will take whatever you give me."

"Whatever comes after I have danced with all the rest, then," she lightly answered; but, as if conscience smote her for thus treating her first kind friend, added, with a little reproachful shrug—"Of course you have been smoking till now, or playing cards with the steady old people—I even wonder you cared to come at all."

At that moment Cust, who, speaking to some one else, had heard nothing of what passed, put his arm round her waist, and both were lost among the dancers.

"That very nearly settles it, Walter Huntley," he thought in his heart, watching them. "The child, after all, likes you well enough—*likes* you, while you are breaking your heart about her—and I would almost rather she hated me, for then I could go away."

"You are wrong—quite wrong," said an energetic whisper in his ear.

He started ; instinctively controlled himself, trying to smile, and saw Juliana beside him.

"Don't imagine I can't guess what you are thinking," continued that lady, in voluble but still guarded undertones, though staring fixedly away before her among the waltzers. "Oh dear ! to see how men spoil their own chances, and girls flirt with the wrong folk, just out of pure contrariety ! It makes me long to give you all a sound shaking. Now *don't* draw yourself up, Captain Huntley. You are annoyed at my speaking so plainly ; but, bless you, what friend could help seeing how changed you have grown ; and I'll tell you what it is, I like you and I like her,—(though I am angry with the child just now)—and you are the only one here good enough for her."

"You are very good to say so, at all events."

"Nonsense ! Now look here, you like plain speaking ; and so do I. Honestly, will

you tell me if I *can* help you—and I'll do it."

"Then honestly, Miss Higgins, I fear the matter is rather past either of our helping." And poor Wat, choking down a sigh, looked, with a smile, as frankly in her face as she could have wished.

"I don't believe it—I won't! Never give up," his partisan answered, with angry warmth. "But why are you wasting precious time? Quick—go and dance; flirt—with anyone! Stuff, don't ask *me*—there is that Mawkesworth girl." ("And our little Miss is already so jealous of her," she added to herself in good-humoured triumph, as Wat, turning sharp upon his heel, took her at her word.)

In a sort of bewilderment he found himself dancing with, and paying compliments to, the heiress, who was at once floated off into a sea of bliss. Then she gasped prettily, and was giddy, needing the support of his arm, and, looking shyly up in his

eyes, innocently wondered who could be the donor of a bouquet she held. (Mabel saw them, and bit her lip with sharp little teeth.) Wat didn't know; how should he? But, unhappily, it just then came back to his mind how, quite early that morning, he had passed by a florist's, and seen her poor companion cheapening a very similar one; so he could guess the heiress paid for her floral triumphs pretty much as some actresses have been said to do for theirs.

"How all those horrid men are running after that little red-haired thing to-night," continued his partner, following the glance of his eyes to a sunny head and black dress among the crowd. "Just because she will have landed property instead of mere money, like us poor creatures."

"What *do* you mean?" he asked, starting from a reverie.

"You droll, perfidious man! As if you did not think of her value as an heiress," she answered, with a simper, modestly con-

scious of her own claims to deference.

"In her case, Miss Mawkesworth, it is the last thing any man who cared for her would remember."

"Oh! that's all very fine to say," answered the fair one, tossing her head with a flushing cheek; "but you know very well no one thinks so in his heart; and if they even say they are not fortune-hunters, who believes them?"

How true is the Chinese proverb—"One has never so much need of his wit as when one has to do with a fool." Leaving her as soon as he could, Wat abruptly made his way out, and going to a cool, deserted reading-room at the rear of the house, threw himself into a deep chair.

If he had wounded a dullard's purse-pride—one so silly that she even expected men to bow down to the fortune she represented—her chance shaft had found the weak joint in his harness. Who indeed *would* believe he had never once guessed

the Langtons were well off—never dreamed the child would have anything but the most nominal of fortunes? And yet it was true.

Looking at him now, even in that dim light, none would have doubted, however, for truth and unselfishness shone from his unhandsome features as flame through a lamp, however rude. As he passed his hand slowly through his hair, with a tired look in his light-blue eyes, one could not even have called him plain, he looked such a kindly, staunch, thorough gentleman, every inch of him.

To some keenly sensitive men the mere thought that smiling doubts may be cast upon the perfect integrity of their motives, rankles like a very sore; so for the first time Wat felt. He had known friends of his own declare they would rather abandon their prospects of happiness, ay! and even the possible attachment to themselves of the woman they loved, rather than be stigmatised for life as fortune-hunters. Yet he



himself had never been ashamed among them to hold an opposite view: theirs seemed to him mental cowardice. With the honest doggedness characteristic of him, he had stoutly held that one's own self-knowledge of acting fairly ought to be moral support enough for any man. While he had that, he would never heed the din of a crew who will belaud the very object (one moment before) of their clamour, should but a likelihood offer that the sunshine of his good fortune may warm them also. True, public opinion, he believed, was generally right in the long run. But then, only give muddy water time, he would say, and the grosser element, by very reason of its coarseness, must sink to the bottom; what remained would alone be worth analysing; would hold the clear judgment of impartial thinkers, and whatever element predominated of the various opinions therein—that would be truth. But now! . . . Even putting aside all thought of the nudg-

ings, the whispers, and the vulgar tongue-thrustings of a small few of the outside world; yet he heartily disliked the idea of not giving all to a wife—would *infinitely* have preferred his sweet Goldenlocks should have been a beggar.

What then? Ay, what then?

Was he in danger of elevating his honour, in the worldly acceptance of the word, to a phantom divinity—no more unreal than those spirits the old Israelites sacrificed to upon high hill-tops; or under the green trees grateful wandering Tartars still hang with tribute; or on the smooth stones of purling streams, blessed life-givers in their thirsty Judæa? Was the shadow men call their honour always true honour? He had sometimes told himself, no.

The fight was fought out and won. He rose, and tried even to smile at himself for thinking it first necessary, since it was too certain she would refuse him; but it was right, he added to himself. Now he was

going back to the dancers—perhaps all was settled already; then Norfolk first, and India in a few weeks, would be his route. “I shan’t stay to see them together,” he said softly aloud, under his breath.

## CHAPTER IV.

" Was it something said,  
 Something done,  
 Vexed him? Was it touch of hand,  
 Turn of head?  
 Strange! that very way  
 Love begun :  
 I as little understand  
 Love's decay."

R. BROWNING.

**A**ND what, meanwhile, was little Mabel  
 doing? It was the child's first dance,  
 and she was so delighted, yet bewildered,  
 she could not think. Down somewhere in  
 her heart was a sense of one bitter disap-  
 pointment. But pride, the whirl and lights  
 and music; the admiration that seemed to  
 buzz in her ears and float round her, per-  
 vading the whole atmosphere; the absolute

intoxication to her warm nature of the very motion—the rhythmical union of steps and sounds—stifled it. The wild little recluse of Cherrybank was as fairly maddened with the draught of pleasure as a simple islander of the Southern Seas with fire-water.

Cust was waltzing with her—dancing was the sole accomplishment included in her father's system of education ; and something in her perfect gliding motion, the serpent grace and swaying movements of her form, confused his brain too. He could hardly let her go. At last he understood her charm for him ! Was he not dancing again, as fourteen years before, with another whose step and touch were maddeningly recalled ? And *she* sat by—smiling in approval as he passed again and again with the little sister who had been in those days an unconscious infant, while he dared not approach her. But for that boyish madness he might be beside her now—might be free. Oh ! that he were so—that . . . !”

There are thoughts in our minds we shrink from ourselves—thoughts so selfish, ugly, hideous, we hustle them out of even our own sight. Would we *dare* confess to any fellow-mortal all the wishes, temptings, that at times have spoken in our hearts; then trust even our dearest leniently to judge us? Thoughts that in the past century would have been owned frankly as real whispers of the living Devil!—but then in these civilized days no such old-fashioned personage is supposed to walk to and fro in our polite society. He went a good deal out with miracle plays; and Sin and Evil, with capital letters, took his place.

It is not too much to say that Cust shuddered as he all at once stopped—for he had found himself longing and wishing for the death of his poor harmless wife!

“What do you really think of my dancing?—tell me truly!” cried Mab, in her excitement, breathless more from happiness than exertion.

He smiled at her with a strange, forced expression.

"You dance almost perfectly—like an angel; though I fear you did not make me feel like one. There! never puzzle your little head with what I mean. I talk a great deal of nonsense very often, because some ladies care to hear nothing better; it is a bad habit."

A little while later he was taking Miss Higgins to seek cool air and ices, for Juliana always declared she liked thoroughout life to get all the good things of every sort that might be had. Suddenly she said,

"Poor Captain Huntley!—I do feel sorry for him! He was so happy for a few days, and now anyone can see how he is changed. So really in love as he was too."

"In love? Old Wat in love? You don't mean it!" exclaimed Cust, in genuine surprise. "Who *was* the lady? Why, such a thing was never known of him before; but then those men always feel it most. Pity

he does not know your charming sex as well as I do."

"Ah! no doubt he has his feelings, though he is too much of a man to show them. However—everybody can't win at the same game, and we may congratulate you, they say. No doubt, too, he'll soon get over it," answered Juliana composedly, as she finished her ice; determined in her heart to have her say out.

"Congratulate me!"—Dick looked at her with still greater surprise; then a gleam of understanding suddenly came into his dark eyes, his brows met in a quick frown, and he drew himself up to his full height. "What can you mean, Miss Higgins—or rather, whom do you mean?"

"Mabel Langton, of course," answered the lady, without flinching, though something weak in her mind suggested it might be better to leave other folk's affairs alone.

"Miss Langton! A child! What folly will these good people imagine next?"



The first surprise past, the whole state of affairs seemed to lie clear to him at once. What must be done to stop this gossip—to undeceive everyone? He tried a tone of pleasant raillery.

“How absurd it does seem! Why, you and I know how very young she is—dear little thing! The idea that she was out of childhood never even entered my head.”

“That’s a pity, considering it did enter other people’s. And as to that, though marriage so young would be very poor fun to my mind, still bondage to anyone would be better than that double-faced Swiss woman as a slave-mistress, when her father dies. Everyone can see it is her only chance.”

Juliana spoke with a steady, impartial matter-of-factness that made things seem still more serious to the startled Colonel. He threw himself down on the sofa beside her, beginning a low, confidential expostulation, that, coming from so handsome a

cavalier, in dangerously close proximity, flattered even that blunt lady's female vanity, as he meant it should.

"But, Miss Higgins, let us talk this over quietly, like old friends. If you are really serious that there is such idle chatter——"

"Perfectly serious."

"Then may I not ask of *you*—as a common friend—to get it hushed as soon as possible? I believe Mrs. Lester no more dreams of such a report than I did a moment ago. Why, she even herself asked me to look after the little one to-night; and we are such old friends, I should hate to have been the cause of vexing her—as any talk about her young sister would, terribly."

"Probably she thinks it would be a very good thing," retorted the unbelieving July, with a jerk of her head. "Not that I do, you know—why, you two would be cat and dog in a month. Oh, I'll contradict it fast enough, and say you've no intentions, if

that's all you want. (Better late than never.) Bless you! I always knew Captain Huntley would suit her a thousand times better."

"You think so?"

"Think! I'm certain. There never was any girl before in the world for him, and there never will be another afterwards. He just opened his eyes on womankind for a moment, and saw her—now he'll go blind again. Oh, Colonel! Colonel! what mischief you handsome, idle, mean-nothing men do make!"

There was pathos in her tone; and the dark, tall man beside her felt more troubled by all this than he cared to own.

"It is impossible I can have done any real mischief; and heaven knows I wish dear old Wat all success, for he is one of the best fellows in the world. As to Mrs. Lester, she must know only too well what a black sheep I am, ever to wish that innocent child's fate to be linked to mine . . .

even were my marrying anyone not absolutely *out of the question* !”

There was a clear, significant emphasis on the latter words, though they were uttered in a still lower tone. Somehow, Miss Higgins felt a little frightened, for, mingling with the secret delight at being installed as a confidant on such interesting topics, was an honest alarm lest she might venture too far in these delicate matters ; so she very gladly returned to the ball-room, but with even a more conscious air of brusque setting-things-to-rights than usual.

And Walter ! While Dick Cust was dancing that last time with his little Mabel, he had sat silently beside Mrs. Lester. If these two did not absolutely understand each other, yet each felt such strange mutual sympathy that it wanted but a touch to remove the thin veil of incomprehension between them. One look did it. Both had watched that pair without a word breaking the current of their thoughts ; at the same

moment both withdrew their gaze; their eyes met—they knew what each was thinking.

“They make a very good couple; do not they?” she said, drooping her eyes; trying still, with a woman’s instinct, to hide her weakness.

“They do. Mrs. Lester—I have been a friend of hers since the first day we met—it is settled; is it not?”

“I don’t know—oh! I don’t know,” she hurriedly whispered, feeling so weak and agitated; for him; for herself. “They have not told me yet; but I believe—— And he admires her so much; and, poor child, she seems so happy.”

Well! it was his turn now, so he rose and went forward. A slow dance it proved to be, and oddly enough (though now all such trifles could matter so little), he was sorry for it. So was Mab, and she frankly told him as much; so frankly that he smiled, looking paternally down at her, he felt so

old this night ; years older than Cust, his senior, with whom age only seemed an advantage.

“ And so you have been enjoying yourself perfectly to-night, you say . . . nothing wanting, then ? The dress still looks very pretty, too,” he said, as the music ended, speaking with a kindly, yet pre-occupied air, as might a grave elder striving to show due interest in the important pleasures of a child.

How dull he had grown, she thought ; a sadly disappointed feeling in her little heart ! They had not talked together for *so* long ; but how different from old times ! from what in her secret soul she had been so greatly looking forward to this very night. However she had so much grown in mind that she hid the sore feeling, and answered something with just the old sauciness.

“ You are engaged no doubt for this next dance ? What, to Cust again ? ” And he attempted a playful smile, which, however, was at best but a twitch of the muscles.

"The new friends have outstripped the old. My star has gone down some time ago before his."

"Not at all! You have no right to say so, for it is quite a different thing," she retorted, bewildered at some strange meaning seeming to underlie his words; hot and angry at his assumption that her fault had occasioned the waning of their former warm friendship, when—when—*it was just the other way!* "He is the greatest friend I have here now, and has always been kind to me. You are a friend, too, of course; but it is quite different."

"I know—it is different," he very quietly repeated, as she abruptly broke off, with warm waves of rosy colour chasing one another over her face; his frank, fearless little Mabel's face, who so seldom blushed.

Both were silent, neither looking at the other. A stream of people was pouring out of the heated dancing-room down a passage—whence an open doorway gave them outlet to

coolness and moonlight in the garden. Following unconsciously with the crowd neither knew it till, on the threshold, the fresh night-air blowing on Mab's face, and pretty, bare shoulders, startled her into awaking from her reverie; she sprang hurriedly aside into a recess beside the door.

"Oh, not out there; not there, please!"

The girl stopped, overcome with shame at remembrance of one former night; stopped with another flush creeping up to the roots of her hair—down to her throat. The last of the people passed out, and they were left alone. Then, with a desperate effort to explain away her alarm, she stammered out,

"You see—you see Colonel Cust told me not to go out to-night into the garden."

"He told you not? Ah, well—he is quite right; and so are you. It will be always wisest to do as he wishes. Only—don't ever think I would have vexed you—



now—by taking you out there. I was in a dream.”

To save his life he could not have helped uttering that “now:” indeed he did not know it. As he looked down at the soft young face he had so dearly loved, the great pain in his eyes might have seemed physical, not only mental. He spoke slowly, too, because his heart seemed caught, and moment by moment crushed in an iron gripe of intense suffering. He had not thought that to see the child’s happiness, her blushes for another, would have hurt like this; involuntarily he looked away, though for one second her hand was pressed with a quick, convulsive movement to his side.

“Do not look frightened,” he said very gently, as she raised her eyes and saw with alarm the spasm contracting his features. “I was in pain for a moment—now I am well again. Let me take you back to Mrs.

Lester, dear child—even my old friend Dick Cust would allow me to call you so for this last time; though from to-night I must always think of you with the respect due to a woman grown.”

They went back in dead silence, and he left her; but at the door he turned for one last look, and could see, through a break in the crowd, that her young face was troubled.

“God bless her! poor little tender heart! She is fretting now because she thinks she has vexed me,” he thought to himself; then turned away.

So Goldenlocks was bidden a long farewell by her poor, rough-visaged, but true-hearted servitor.

“Dear, dear! Now some folk would give their eyes to be worshipped like that. It’s queer no one ever took much to kissing the dust under your feet, Juliana Higgins,” thought one honest, if unpolished, soul who watched him with sundry nods from afar. “Heigho! Perhaps you used to knock the

nonsense too much out of their heads, and then wondered it wasn't there!"

"Something seems the matter with you; you don't care to dance," the Colonel was just then saying to his little partner.

"It has grown dull and stupid, and my feet won't go properly somehow. Let us sit down," she answered, with a quaintly comical expression, as she tried to combat peevishness, that made him laugh.

"What has become of poor Huntley? I am afraid I have monopolised you too much to-night. It was very unfair to him, as he had not the advantage of Mrs. Lester's sanction, like myself," went on her companion, with apparent carelessness, as they seated themselves, but seeing keenly how her expression changed at once.

"How should I know where he is?—gone to smoke instead of dancing, no doubt. And it was quite fair of you too: I suppose I may have what friends I like without offending him."

That cross, tired answer, as of a sleepy child, pleased her hearer more than he could say.

“Ah! my little lady, but take care you don't lose your best friends. Wat Huntley would make a very different one from me; worth just one thousand times as much. If you were ever to ask me to stand by you in emergency, I would do so to the death—for any woman I should do the same, if I know myself. But then it must be an all-important occasion; I should advise no one to rely on me in every-day life. How could such as I be a fit friend for any young girl?—do you know I am a very bad man?”

It seemed natural to him to speak down, as if to a child, to that dark-robed youthful creature with wondering face and parted lips; but no childish gleam came into her eyes as she answered—fearlessly ready to take the part of all who showed her kindness, even against themselves—

"I don't care! No matter how bad you were, I should always trust you, nevertheless: you *are* good at heart—are you not? And perhaps if—if you ever did wrong things, it was more the fault of others than your own."

She was pleading with himself for himself, and her high spirit found a ready echo in his breast; yet he answered sadly enough,

"I wish most heartily I could think so; but it would be mean. No, no; even when things are blackest, I always try to look them boldly in the face, and recognise they are brought upon me by my own doing. Is there not something about sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind? One has heard that somewhere, eh? Well, that is what I feel—often!

"There! don't trouble your little soul about me or my sins," he went on, with a sudden air of lightness, as he saw the child

sobered and thoughtful. The handsome Colonel had been led to say more than he meant; irresistibly drawn at stray times by sympathetic woman-eyes, as he could be, to confide something of the dark troubles that at such seasons beset him. "Sometimes one seems to get partly rid of one's follies, simply by detailing the catalogue to another; but you can hardly understand that yet."

"Still I think I can a—little," she answered, with downcast eyes. "For instance, too, when everything seems against us, and people one likes grow cold and strange, it would be such a relief to tell it all, if only one could, to somebody."

"So you feel that too—poor little girl! But don't vex yourself, it will all come right by-and-by."

Half-frightened at his tone of knowledge, she looked quickly up; but he had purposely averted his gaze. The quiet consola-

tion in his voice, however, re-assured her a little—

“What do you mean? You don’t know——”

“I know nothing you may not wish me to know. Only if ever you want a listener to your little troubles, I might perhaps know more than you think, and would do my best warmly. One has eyes and ears, you will acknowledge; and if you were a little vexed to-night, is it any wonder I should guess it? Never mind; I saw another person who was not at all happy either, but to-morrow will set everything to rights. . . . Let us go to Mrs. Lester.”

So he took her back, silent and shame-faced, but rather happier in her heart; for she had felt most miserable when Wat had so strangely quitted her. Now Cust’s mysterious sympathy gave her shy, fresh hope, mingled with curiosity as to how he knew, what he knew, or whether he *really* meant anything very particular!

"Good night—to-morrow it will all be right," he whispered at the foot of the stairs, while holding her hand, and she smiled—a frightened, tired, though pleased little smile; while poor Maud Lester waited patiently by, neither knowing how near she was.

Yet, inexplicable to her own courageous small self, Mab's pillow was wet with tears that night more bitter than any ever caused by Madame's harshness. She was so dreadfully tired, she "could not help crying," she told herself; and she had so hoped this her very first dance would have been so different: a beginning of the golden time of which her first friendship with Wat—days ago—had been the blessed dawn.

Was he angry, or indifferent? What had he meant?—what had he said? She was growing sleepy now, and could not even clearly remember all; confused as his very presence so near had made her then. But she would see him to-morrow; ah! would



he look at her as he once used? What had strangely come to her?

“Dear child!”—yes, that his voice at least had called her lately . . . So the child fell asleep.

## CHAPTER V.

"If thou wilt ease thine heart  
 Of love, and all its smart—  
 Then sleep, dear, sleep!  
 And not a sorrow  
 Hang any tear on your eyelashes;  
 Lie still and deep,  
 Sad soul, until the sea-wave lashes  
 The rim o' the sun to-morrow  
 In Eastern sky."

BEDDOES.

"ARE you awake, Miss Mabel? Dear;  
 dear! How bad she *do* look,  
 certainly!" candidly observed Agnes Hitch-  
 cocks, aloud, next morning. For the only  
 colour in her little mistress's face seemed to  
 be in her dark-ringed and swollen eyelids,  
 while her eyes were heavy and more pale-  
 coloured brown than usual, with all the

warm glow and soft brightness washed out of them.

"What o'clock is it?" she asked, with a very tired yawn.

"Midday, very nearly. And Mrs. Lester, she was up an hour ago, for she heard of some poor widow with a broken leg and a family, and was off to see them before you could turn yourself round—just as active as active can be when the poor is anyways concerned."

After a time Mabel came slowly out to the front of the house, where her sister was seated, waiting for her. It was not a pleasant day; depressing her the more with her tiredness and the disappointing recollections and thoughts which had cruelly grappled hold of her on awaking—and kept their grasp, since neither mind nor body would, as usual, help each other in the upspringing of elastic hope. Despite Cust's words, all things seemed sombre—the very sky clouded and overcast.

There was a cold touch of Autumn in the wind too, which, not noisily, but with a quiet malice in its sweeping sough, was hustling and jostling all leaf-twigs, shaking the flowers, and striving, before its time, to spoil the beauty of their sweet heads.

There was her father, walking slowly, while he heavily leant on his stick and muttered to himself, his thoughts being probably deep in the earth, among heated or compressed rocks, dreaming of upheavals and slow depressions. She timidly advanced a little towards him (for he might perhaps—surely would—take *some* notice!)—but sharply turned the next moment, repelled, not so much by his start and look of annoyance as by the ceremonious politeness he made an effort to assume; then stood in dejection, watching his bent head and frail figure as he hurriedly shambled away.

“Good morning, Mabel, dear. Here am I trying to make-believe it is still Summer. Why, my child, how tired you are!”

"Horribly so! I could not sleep very well; but you look as fresh and as nice as ever, my Mrs. Lester," answered Mab, with a useless attempt at brightness, sinking down on the bench beside her sister.

The elder woman had been very wakeful too, if the truth were known; yet, as the girl said, she seemed even more sweet and calm than usual.

"Do you know, Maud," continued the latter, with weary disconsolateness, nodding her head in the direction of her father, "I really do think *he* dislikes my very sight."

The old grievance. Perhaps more one of the imagination than of the heart, fed from fancying what delight it would be if he *did* love her, rather than by her own affection, which had been too constantly repelled. This sorrow had been laid aside of late, during strangely new, exciting phases of mind; now her troubles of last night roused it again, and poor Mrs. Lester, though marvelling

in her heart how anyone so apparently loved by and loving Richard Cust, could want more happiness, made a great effort of brain to find consolation.

“Dear child, he cares for you more than he could for any other of womankind. As long as I remember, he always seemed to wish the world could be peopled only by philosophers or men of science, and that such necessary creatures as we poor things could be demonstrated to be superfluous.”

Here came Miss Higgins past the flower-beds, looking healthy and energetic as usual; yet with her peck of troubles too, as she sat down on the grass at Mrs. Lester's feet, inelegantly hugging her knees, while serio-comically beginning to claim pity for her increasing years.

“The fact is,” she observed, proceeding to fix her gaze upon Maud's universally comforting face—“fact is, I'm growing *passay*! No use disguising ugly facts, Mrs. Lester; and when the young girls are danced

off with—though I know I'm thought more agreeable—the signs are plain. And I always did say I'd retire gracefully; not to give any folk the satisfaction of saying, Time for her! Still the truth is, when I feel as if I had lots of energy and spirits left, it will be hard not to use them up in some fashion; but I am thinking seriously whether going in for women's rights would not look more appropriate than gaiety. For one thing, we *ought* to have a right to keep young as long as men do. Now you don't feel old one bit, do you, Mrs. Lester?"

At this direct appeal their patron saint looked somewhat guilty, for, in truth, she had once or twice told herself of late (since Mr. Lester's death) that she did feel very young—as much so as in her girlish days. Last night it had especially seemed tantalising to sit quietly by, while Dick Cust, her partner of so many long past dances, passed by with her much younger sister.

Fortunately Juliana required no answers,

replying to herself unless they were speedily forthcoming.

"The worst of it is, I should not care a straw for more education than they already crammed into me. Dear, dear, don't you wish we were all taught a trade, little one? Engraving, now, or gilding; you and I could use our hands."

"If all women had homes of their own, and looked after these and their poor properly, they would not have time to compete with men," didactically observed Maud; but then we all know Mrs. Lester was not wonderfully clever.

"Homes of their own! But that's just it," retorted the aggrieved Juliana: "we haven't! In the East they go into harems, and in other countries into convents; but we can hardly get rid of our surplus in that fashion. We old maids—oh! yes, I am one—just exist somehow till we are turned out of the paternal nest, and then end our days tea-drinking quietly in a cheap cottage. Heigho!



Now, at my age, with health and strength and some brains, it is just hateful to feel sinking into decay like that, for want of something to *do*: something to spirit one up! I wish I had been *only* born a man—or a maid-of-all-work.”

Mabel remained modestly silent while her elders said their say. What was she that she should offer opinions of her own? Yet she was conscious the while that Juliana's good-humoured grumbling (perhaps intended to hide a deeper meaning) woke in herself another vaguer, finer feeling she had often felt: a sentiment she could not explain—born in some of those long, sunny Summer days she had spent all alone in the rustling beechwoods, which rose steep and thick to the uplying patch of common on the breezy ridge of the hills, while in the wood's very heart she lay among the palm-like bracken clusters at the foot of some smooth-stemmed tree, examining curiously the tiny moss forests below her—the infinitesimal world

of animal life. Tiny things these, moving and striving, peopling the blades, stalks, and culms of the grasses,—of the infinitesimal flowers and plants which grew up so closely and thickly all around.

At such times she was conscious of a mysterious yearning, an undefined restlessness, which would possess her with its strivings and longings to go somewhere—she knew not whither! to do something—she knew not what!

And, though all Nature then seemed peaceful and at rest, as she would look from her lair in the bosom of Mother Earth, dreamily down through the whitish, shimmering beech-boles, and their long waving layers of branches above, whose leaves caught and reflected little beams of sunlight,—yet it had not been so in Spring! Then the whole round world to her had seemed striving too, yearning, bursting forth, renewing itself, and—till its work was done—full of the same restless craving for some change or accomplishment.

Dim thoughts, she hardly sought to comprehend, had seemed to suggest themselves in those dreams, as of one great Plan, in whose ordering and working out all creation, animate and inanimate, lower forms of life no less than human—all things organic and inorganic—the whole cosmos!—seemed to take part; ever working! working! towards some end dim and remote as the origin of some of those rocks over whose stony secrets her father so wearily pondered. A labour whose interruption perchance it was which made nature at times seem to jar in harsh discords till all could again move forward in smooth harmony to the final fulfilment of its grand mysterious destiny. While what was the restlessness of human spirits, but the soul-discord of those who had not yet found their appointed place in this world-task? Unhappy ones! unable to rejoice in their great surroundings with sympathetic union and concord!

Only dreams!—vague as those we forget

on opening our eyelids—and when she tried to hint of them to Maud she would grow confused and unintelligible. Whereupon, Mrs. Lester, who put away easily any thoughts which seemed perplexing, having faith for all she could not understand, would look grave, uttering some gentle little dogmas upon the wrong of exercising the mind in too high matters, or the duty of always feeling satisfied; always peacefully content. What common sense and revealed religion did not explain to her, seemed forbidden topics.

Yet somehow Mab felt as if her sister's opinions were barriers, needful perhaps, yet surely narrow; excluding much she thought beautiful and elevating—closing her in too selfishly. She could not explain the feeling.

To Mrs. Lester the world was,—well—the earth! the central thing of the universe. Created in seven days without previous existence—and once entirely flooded by the

Deluge ; now peopled by one human race, and also possessing animals, plants, etc., which were useful to man, and therefore only called into existence—of course, at his creation ; while religion was derived from the Bible, and could not be guessed at without it.

But even to Mabel's yet undeveloped mind, being her father's very daughter, almost every one of these beliefs gave well-nigh pain to hear gently yet firmly reiterated—for the child in her loneliness had wondered, read, again puzzled, and thought. To her the earth was all-wondrous !—yet but a speck in the mighty sea of space, amongst the kindred islands of the universe. And from Nature alone her mind (then at least) in its childlike, untroubled gladness, would have made a religion for itself in praise of the unknown Maker, not the Matter—would have sat at the feet of

“ . . . that white soul, clothed with a satyr's form,  
Which shone beneath the laurels day by day,  
And, fired with burning faith in God and Right,  
Doubted men's doubts away.”

The only one to whom she would have cared to unfold these dreams of hers was Walter Huntley. *He* always understood, despite her shyness; despite the timid confusion of her sentences.

"Hu-u-sh! Here comes Mrs. Langton!" said Juliana, all of a sudden, in a loud warning whisper, although no one was uttering a syllable. "Good morning. Well, you *are* unrecognizable behind that brown veil! Some people do know how to take care of their complexions! And where have you been?"

It was not a studiously polite mode of address, and Madame, who had come up with velvet paws, as it happened, now closed her thin lips viciously behind that veil.

"I? Ah, I have just had a tender scene. The Capitaine Huntley has been making his adieux to me, as I met him on his way to the station."

- Then, as exclamations of surprise burst

from all, she continued with a palpable sneer—

“What! Did he neglect to say good-bye to his charming Mees Higgins? What *infamie*! But console yourself—Mabel is even more shamefully treated. You must both cry your tears together.”

She was watching with malicious pleasure poor Mabel's face whiten a little, and then harden into a steady composure. But she felt furious with the girl for merely blanching; then defeating her by such sudden self-control. This was not gratifying enough.

“I daresay he has only gone away for a day or so; perhaps to York,” said her victim calmly, after a moment's silence.

“Not so, *pauvre petite*; the faithless one is gone to Norfolk, on a visit of pleasure to some relatives. He was so eager to go—*très gai*!—Ah! say I, ‘there are attractions?’—and he confesses I have guessed right—there are such pretty cousins!”

Would that little detestable one make no

sign? A-ah! what obstinacy! Yet surely her lips had quivered a little! She must have given him up then, and be entirely occupied in mind with the Colonel.

Miss Higgins softly whistled to herself a fragment of an Offenbachian opera; Maud, wondering what it was that seemed amiss with everyone, now spoke up too in her deep, quiet voice.

"I do remember now, when I met Captain Huntley this morning, as I was hurrying to see a poor woman, that he begged me to stop. He said he must start for somewhere suddenly; and feared he would not see you before leaving, Mabel. Then he said good-bye, and shook hands. Really I was so hurried—and he seemed rather odd and unlike himself too—that I hardly knew what he meant."

"But when does he return, which is more to the purpose?" broke in Juliana, transfixing Mrs. Langton with her black eyes.

"That, he said, would depend upon cir-



cumstances," sweetly quoth the latter. "Not till we are gone, I however fear. Excuse me; I must go in," and she hastily turned and glided quietly towards the house.

"'Who comes here?  
A Grenadier.'

It is Colonel Cust! One would think he had startled her," audibly quoted Miss Higgins; soliloquising still more pointedly, "Is this a time of day to make one's first appearance? The more there is of a man, apparently, the longer it takes him to rest."

"Pray don't quash the first strivings towards economy I have shown for many a day," answered the Colonel, after making his morning greetings to all with a certain stately courtesy, which July secretly remarked was more assumed of late; but which she also thought suited him wonderfully well. "My man horrified me on awakening with such a pile of blue envelopes, which long experience whispered held bills, that

I resolved to reform my ways at once, and have just combined breakfast and luncheon."

"Listen! Whom do you think has deserted us?" burst out Juliana, trying to cover her strong indignation by a comically tragic air, as she related Huntley's departure. In truth, she hardly knew upon whom to pour her vials of wrath; but there they were in store for somebody.

Cust raised his eyebrows; he was really sorry, but feared to annoy Mabel by remarks.

"Off for the partridges, no doubt; I know he is a first-rate shot; but I wonder he did not look us up before going."

"You could hardly expect him to miss his train, if we chose to stay half the day in bed."

It was Mabel who spoke, and in his heart Cust felt an admiration for her steadiness, and the way in which she defended the absent.

When Dick met his confidante, Juliana,

after awhile, he asked her what it all meant.

"How should I know?" she answered him quite surlily, for she was angry with Dick too. ("Not know he was making mischief? Fiddlesticks! He ought to have known," she had said to herself.) "All I can say is, that men are stupid enough as a general rule, but when they are in love—goodness help them! It goes to their brains at once."

About the same time the two sisters came indoors, neither confessing to the other the low spirits both felt, yet would not deign to own; and entering their sitting-room with the lackadaisical air of people who have been staying up till unusually late hours, they there found, installed by the fire, old Mrs. Cust, who was paying a visit to Madame.

The old lady was beautifully dressed, as always; but was wrapped in a soft white Shetland shawl, while black lace was draped with studied gracefulness around her head

and throat. Similar costly lace too fell deeply over her hands, loaded with flashing rings—fit heirlooms of her ancient race—for she was a very vain old lady, and her vanity took the form of concealing as far as possible from sight the change time had made in those small hands sculptors had once vied to model; that beauty which painters had once implored her permission to copy, that her picture might but hang in their studios.

“Ah, here come my Clytie and our small favourite, just as I am going away. They did not care to come in sooner for only an old woman racked with rheumatism. No excuses; I came to visit Mrs. Langton, not you two, this time; and she has kindly gratified me by talking French. We are never too old to keep up our accomplishments, little Miss Mabel . . . Would you send for my maid—ah! thank you; thank you.” Then, going on glibly in the Gallic tongue, “So good of you to praise my an-

tiquated French, Mrs. Langton. It is many years since I was brought up in dear Paris. And you are Swiss, you say? Excuse a stupid old woman, whose memory is very bad."

And the stupid old woman, as she styled herself, watched Madame keenly, while the latter explained that Mrs. Cust's memory was quite correct; then echoed, "Ah, yes! ah, yes!" as she slowly rose; supporting herself on a gold-topped, ebony stick.

It was a favourite trick of hers to plead forgetfulness when she wished people to re-assert doubtful statements.

"Ah, here you are, Lisa; give me your arm," and so, enveloping herself in a second shawl, to guard against draughts in the passages, the old woman hobbled out with the dignity of a wrinkled witch-queen.

"Madame has had pleasure in conversing in French with Mrs. Langton, is it not so?" enquired her confidential attendant

"Ugh! no; my good Lisa. (What a

---

blast through my old bones!) In fact, I cordially detest her."

"Mrs. Langton has had her hair dyed light, I perceive," went on Lisa, whose Frenchwoman's eyes were hawk-like as regarded personal appearances.

"Very probably: I could believe anything underbred of her. I thought so too; but my old eyes are no use in that way now."

Lisa observed that it was strange, but Mrs. Langton reminded her most forcibly of a girl who used to be at school with her years ago at Strasbourg.

"Poke up the fire, please. She is no more Swiss than I am," said her old mistress, somewhat as if the rheumatism were fixed in her jaws, and that they would only uncloset to let out one sharp aching word or so at a time. "Ah, I must unthaw. I trust she will not be the cause of my death."

## CHAPTER VI.

"Youth is full of pleasance.

Age is full of care:

Youth like summer morn,

Age like winter weather.

Youth like summer brave,

Age like winter bare."

*From the "Passionate Pilgrim."*

AFTER dinner that night, a twisted note was brought to Mrs. Lester by a footman in the Cust livery.

"Pray have pity on a cross old woman, my dear Mrs. Lester, and come in here with your pretty little sister to drink tea. I am bored to death, and have nothing new to think of—but a new attack of cold.

"Your old friend,

"DOROTHY CUST."

So they left their own sitting-room, which Madame—though she was calm gentleness itself nowadays, even to Mab—seemed purposely to keep uncomfortable. Perhaps anxious to get rid of them because her old spouse was dozing by the fire; murmuring irritably at any sound which grated on his ears; most especially at her own cautious movements. Then tapping at Mrs. Cust's door, they came at once into luxurious warmth, light, and sweetness.

That patrician dame was all but smothered in wrappings which left only her eyes, nose, and one hand visible; the latter being extricated to direct the footman with authority.

“Place the tea-things before Mrs. Lester—*so!*” she cried, shrilly uplifting her voice; then, dropping the next moment into a mournful cadence, “My dears, excuse my bad temper—it is a relief when one is old, and sick, and cross . . . and my days are three score and ten! . . . Ah, yes! *Now*



the table is on Mrs. Lester's dress! You quit my service in a month—to-morrow! How can one live in such times as these?"

Her anger, goaded by pain, had burst forth, only because the man moved the tea-equipage awkwardly, being in fear of those terrible old watching eyes; but he was too well trained to these occasional explosions of the Newland family temper not to remain in submissive composure, awaiting any further little amenities.

"You may leave the room," was the command he expected; and it was accordingly delivered with such dignity and proud condescension that one could with difficulty have credited that the stately gentlewoman who gave it, well-stricken in years and high-bred as she was, could possibly have just flown in a rage, or raised her voice to such an ear-piercing pitch.

So the sisters sat there for a time with her—the firelight playing upon them—feeling by-and-by pleasantly, dreamily enervat-

ed. Signs of that old woman's taste were everywhere apparent; from the flowers which were stacked in heaps in the vases belonging to the room, to the photographs, sketches, and uncut novels that strewed the tables.

Mab was unusually quiet that night; achingly dull, not merely jaded and limp from physical relaxation after too great tension; and, very contrary to custom, her nature was even uninfluenced by the insensibly stealing charm of sensuousness conveyed in ease and warmth, shaded light, and sweet—almost too heavy—scents. Their old hostess talked agreeably, however, as belonging to those brilliant bygone days when conversation, as such, flourished (though her voice came querulously from out of those unaccountable wrappings). But, pain or no! it was part of her fastidious ideas of good-breeding not to annoy her guests by obtruding her own physical suffering on their observation.

At last, however, after a more excruciating twinge than usual from the enemy, her poor old voice quivered—stopped abruptly ; then went on, in a wobegone tone of broken-spirited mournfulness,

“Ah! dear me! . . . *Flesh is grass!*” Then, with a touch of her sharp, undying curiosity to Mrs. Lester—“My dear!—you say you are sometimes ailing too. Now pray tell me ; what do you find most comforting? . . . *D’ye read good books?*”

This last sentence came out with such a peering look and inquisitive quickness that Mabel could hardly suppress a laugh, especially as Mrs. Lester’s experience that light literature was more efficacious in diverting the mind from rheumatic agonies, was received by their pagan old friend with a sigh of intense relief.

“My good-for-nothing grand-nephew, Richard, always spoke to me of you, my dear, as one of the best women he knows ; and his good opinion of women is so rare

that—Dear me, I am growing doting! One ought never to praise persons so openly to their faces; however, praise of their moral qualities never seems to take people so much aback as flattery of their looks—probably because they know men only consider goodness in their second thoughts. But we Newlands all appreciate it, my dear—perhaps because we possess so little of it ourselves!”

One old black eye reconnoitered as sharply through her veiling lace as might an eye of seventeen years, instead of one which had seen over seventy.

For Dick has apparently not followed up his liking for the odd, rather captivating little visitor beside her; and our ancient match-maker somehow thinks her beautiful elder guest would be far more suitable for that handsome, wicked, generous scion of the Newlands, and idol of her childless old age. As for Maud, she shifted uneasily on

her chair, and screened her face from the scorching heat.

"Our little favourite here will soon have pretty things said about her too. You must see that she is well married, my dear—well married! Young ladies ought modestly to wait for willing captives!—not slave-hunt for themselves! but a little judicious help may be the establishing of a life's ease and happiness."

"And what do you think requisite in marriage, Mrs. Cust?" asked Maud, in her rich, bell-like tones, humouring the old woman's vein.

"What is requisite, do you say?" mused their aged counsellor, with sage deliberation. "Let—us—see. Why, *good family*, my dear—good family! and *good fortune*! and good principles, my dear—GOOD PRINCIPLES!"

"But, dear Mrs. Cust," objected Maud, with a smile, while a certain dark look of

obstinate resolve grew on a soft young face beside her, "all three may be so rarely combined. You have so much experience; pray tell us, for Mabel's benefit, which of the three you think absolutely the most necessary."

"Well, my dears, it is not so easy to say—for so much depends on one's own individual character," responded the Sybil; whose resemblance to one of the weird sisters, as she leaned forward on her stick to discuss the question, was now truly appalling. Her voice too, cold having attacked her throat, was at present little better than a hoarse croak—though it still politely struggled to be a modulated one. "For one thing, family is a great support to one's pride—great! And a *mésalliance* must be a thorn in the flesh for life-time. Such a thing never occurred in *our* family, and I am quite certain our little Mabel here has far too much respect for her own family ever to marry beneath her—of course,

my dear! . . . But still again, good fortune makes life a very easy matter—and there is no better way of being charitable and contented, and never coveting your neighbour's goods, than having much better ones of your own . . . I declare I begin to believe that the *parvenus* derive more enjoyment from spending their millions than the old families get by thinking over their ancestry." Then, in a tone of strict confidence—"And as to the principles, my dears—why—all men are naturally hypocrites, and if you get the first and second, *you must just trust in Providence for the third.*"

At which piece of advice, delivered in a cynical stage-whisper, with a glance of mirthful, wicked, intelligence, both sisters burst out laughing.

By-and-by their old hostess's thoughts took another direction, and she turned to Mab, but with carefully masked inquisitiveness.

"I have forgotten whether you ever told me your step-mother's maiden name, my dear. How troublesome we old people are, to be sure! We must always preface our conversation with excuses."

"But I don't think you ever *did* ask me, Mrs. Cust," said Mabel, with frankness. "Her name was Mademoiselle Wellnar—Adèle Wellnar."

After they had said good night, and when her French maid was aiding in the slow task of preparing Mrs. Cust for her slumbers, that old lady sharply turned to her.

"Lisa, can you remember the name of the French girl whom you were at school with, and whom Mrs. Langton resembles? Was it *Adèle Wellnar*?"

"*Mais non, Madame.* It was altogether a different name."

Her school-mate's name was Azelie Wolff; and it was only the merest likeness in voice or expression—a nothing. Besides, Azelie



had dark-brown hair, and was quite a low-class order of girl.

Whereat Mrs. Cust gave a contemptuous and significant movement of her head, and resigned herself to rheumatism, varied by slumbers.

## CHAPTER VII.

" Beautiful, beautiful she lay below,  
The mighty Mother of humanity.

. . . . .  
But at the darkening of the Veil, she drew  
The wild things to herself, and husht their cries ;  
Then, stiller, dumber, search'd the deepening Blue  
With passionate blind eyes ;  
And went the old life over in her thought,  
Dreamily praying as her memory wrought  
The dimly guessed at, never utter'd tale."

R. BUCHANAN.

NEXT day proved fine, and Cust exerted himself to get up an excursion to Studley Royal.

Mabel, in her ingratitude, was not one whit pleased. Dull and depressed, she would rather have hidden herself from sight in her

own room, not knowing of a conversation which had taken place about her.

"Do let us all make an effort to be enlivened, Miss Higgins. Not only for her sake, for even you seem as mournful as a gentle turtle-dove."

"Go to your own looking-glass, Colonel ! Consider yourself in that glass-house, and throw no stones at our gloomy faces ! But our little mouse does look sadly forlorn. Can't you take her for a gallop ?"

Mabel was willing enough to ride, but she proved so perverse that poor Cust was at his wits' end ; for nothing would satisfy her except riding his own wicked chestnut. Protestations were useless. She knew her power over him, and pouted or worked herself into a fit of ill-temper, till, in his good-nature, he gave way, and they started.

As usual, Mrs. Lester's fate was to have companionship in the carriage which grated on her fastidious, secret soul ; but the sacri-

rice was only one more to secure soon her darling's happiness. The Higgins party, however, were hushed by her presence into comparative demureness. Only Miss Mawkesworth was lively, since she felt convinced her own gentility must strike the superior order of being among them.

With "nods and becks and wreathed smiles," she accordingly entertained the rest, whilst July waxed wroth in her heart. At last the misguided heiress took to displaying the miscellaneous bunch of charms on her watch-chain—loquets, bangles, carved corals, coins.

"Really," as she observed, simpering, "I seem quite fortune's favourite! I believe there is nothing in the world I have not got attached to my charms."

"Except a few *admirers!*" burst forth the enemy, for the first time breaking silence, with a triumphant glance at her sisters, and a hearty laugh at her own repartee. (For the heiress had decidedly snubbed the second young Higgins of late, and there

was no profit now, and small pleasure, in her continued friendship.)

Cust with special forethought begged his riding-party to start early, since he was afraid Mrs. Lester might be nervous, were she to see the chestnut's vagaries. But, to his inward thankfulness, no mishap occurred. Perhaps Mabel rode very carefully, owing to his entreaties; or, feeling dispirited, her mood communicated itself to the horse. She spoke very little all the way, and her thoughts were not very cheerful, poor child! She had grown strange even to herself: dull, stupid, and without spirit enough to be angered at her own want of vigour. The sense of freedom from all trouble, born within her in the old wild loneliness, and not even killed during the dark time since Madame's rule, was now gone—for ever! as she told herself with the tragic hopelessness of her age. What were the novelty and excitement of being here to her now? Her first, best friend had left!—was gone in

coldness, without so much as saying good-bye to the child he considered her. And she!—O, she would so gladly go back even to the restraints, coldness, and thousand vexations of life at home: the sooner the better! One pain might kill the other, she thought—a truth known since the days of Hippocrates. For her the play here was now played out; the lights and music gone, and only a disillusionising sense of silent emptiness and vacancy remained. “No; he would not come back till they had left,”—she felt sure of it; and the little girl was very tired and weary of the whole place, and of everybody.

She woke up out of her brooding, however, when at last they rode under the trees of Studley, with its deep thick woods and its gleams of water. Then, when the whole party had assembled, they lunched in a Summer-house overlooking a sheet of water; all seeming gay and sociable as they ate and talked, watching the wild-fowl flapping and

diving. After that the whole party wandered about, up by broad walks under the shady trees to view-points, from which one looked down on the wooded valley closing lovingly round the grand ruined Abbey—one of the fairest in all dear Old England—whose tower rose up against the surrounding greenery, seemingly, from that distance, almost as fresh as on the day when last it heard the sound of chisel and ring of hammer.

When they had strolled down to see it closer, Mabel, after going partly round the ruins with the rest, slipped away whilst they were exploring the dark prisons which once immured, closer than could vows or discipline, dead and gone monks of old, whose sin only lay, perchance, in being hated of some cruel abbot's iron soul.

The damp air in those vaults seemed to chill her inmost being—sensitive as she was to all degrees of temperature. So she stole quietly back into the beautiful nave of the

ruin, roofed with heaven's flooring, closed in by grandly ancient, ivy-hung walls, with earth's carpet of grass gently covering it under foot; there, sitting down at the base of a column, she looked dreamily up the nave at the immovable beauty of the great window—colourless, paneless, yet still glorious in outline and workmanship.

She had a many-sided nature, sensuously made glad by light and warmth, and such good gifts of earth; artistically delighting in all beauty of nature and art which satisfied her eyes and understanding; yet she had also a nobler, dreamy, impassioned love of her whole soul and intellect for all that raised her out of herself into a state of higher contemplation, appealing to her by the wonders of science, by the still living thoughts of dead, glorious philosophers!—calling to her inmost spirit in solemn strains of worshipping music, or by the sunny glory of thanksgiving on the earth's blind, but beautiful face; drawing her by mysteri-



ous calls and subtle affinities upwards to vague, dreaming visions of the Unseen, the Invisible!

To her, now, the old Abbey is restored once more. Lights gleam, and censers swing before the high altar. Sweet-voiced choristers are sending their best offering upward to God's throne in a sacred song of praise, whose glad notes sound thanksgivingly in Heaven!—whose echoes only fall back upon our earth! Older monks too are giving their best—the prayers of their strong men's souls; the dedication of their lives! The very workmen who spent their whole cunning on those stained windows; in that fair tracery of stonework; on the skilled carving of stalls—gave also, remembering the words of the Preacher, and so making their souls enjoy good in their labour, which joy is the gift of the Giver. And their WORK also seemed to her WORSHIP.

Nay, more. Surely the great Mother herself offered her best in those consecrated

woods, and stones, and materials, which, it might be, were thus impregnated with a dim sentient knowledge that they too were passively, dumbly taking their part in voiceless praise—while the very organ-pipes thrilled conscious of that worship in thanksgiving, of all things in creation besides man, whereof they conveyed the expression . . .

Colonel Cust came out from a ruinous doorway. Alas! her dream was broken! He had been hunting for her, high and low, those last ten minutes, while she was entranced, crouched there upon a stone.

“What have you been thinking of?” he called to her, as he strode over the grass; then repeated his question, coming close up to the pillar.

“Thinking of?—I could hardly tell you . . . trying to imagine olden times. I wish I had lived then! . . . there was far more beauty in everything, their lives, and crusades and vows—see, even in architecture.”

“You would like to have lived then—

not you!" he said, with the smile one accords a child's fancy. "How would you have liked a nun's ugly gown, with a black hood over your little head, instead of the pretty ball-dress of the other night?"

"Now that is so like a *man*!" she exclaimed, stamping her little foot, half playfully, yet with an irritation which no speech of Huntley's had ever awakened—(but then he always *understood*). "If Madame were here she would be just as bad—give a sneer, and observe that the world was composed of men and women, *and* priests."

"You are growing too old. When first I met you, and that not many days ago, you had very little knowledge of what was 'like a man.' But we must hurry. There is a shower coming, and Mrs. Lester sent me to find you."

The shower was not only coming, but had come. Hardly had they got clear of the ruins before it was upon them, driving in their faces, lashing the grass, stinging Mab's

cheeks as she and Cust ran for shelter through its pelting. Luckily there was a cottage at some distance, towards which they sped breathlessly over the soaking grass; rushed helter-skelter up the tiny, paved garden walk, and burst into the kitchen.

"That was a run for it!" exclaimed Cust, as Mab pulled off her dripping hat, with a glorious glow in her cheeks. "I never knew a girl in such splendid training. Here, mother!" he cried to the good woman of the cottage, ready to bestow upon her some of the wild spirits his run had aroused. "We have just been running off together—this young lady and I, and have been caught in the flood on our way. Will you dry us at this splendid fire of yours, like a kind Christian soul?"

Would she? Of course that jolly, print-gowned, white-aproned goodwife would. She bobbed, simpered, and bade Cust make himself at home, whilst he paid her various compliments on her good looks; being

told in return, with a bridling air and some self-conscious laughter, that, were she the young lady, she would not wait twice to be asked to go off with him.

Mabel had already established herself on a low stool, close to a glowing grate, and was scorching her face, while symptoms of steam exhaled from her habit. Cust stood, tall and straight, beside her, leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece, and examining, with curiosity, its adornments—prints of our Princes and Princesses, with unflatteringly swelled faces, and photographs, on glass, of the good woman's entire family; all having been taken holding on desperately, in turn, by the same chair-back.

Beyond the clean little kitchen, with its scoured dresser and red-bricked floor, was a small back-room, where the cottager soon betook herself in humble politeness.

After a time Mabel looked up, warmed—and in good humour with the comfortable feeling.

"We shall be starting home soon. How you must hope I may be nicer than I was this morning. I *was* cross, was I not?"

"So-so," he briefly answered; adding—"I am afraid you will prove hard to manage, unless you meet with some one of whom you are very fond."

No answer to that; the drying process was hurriedly resumed, and the other cheek soon became terribly burnt.

He himself took up the thread of talk next.

"I wrote to Huntley this morning. We two had settled to go to Doncaster together; so I want him to come back here for a day and join me."

"Indeed! . . . . How did you know his address?" (Short as Laconian speech.)

"Got it from Mrs. Brown-Jones." (Wife of the hotel proprietor.)

A cricket chirruped in some cosy chink; the clock ticked; a great-grandmother old cat purred and washed over her ears, but

there was no other sound to betray pleasure.

"You will scorch your habit—let me put these fallen cinders where they will do no mischief!" Stooping as he spoke to remove some dangerously near live coals, his head was one moment close to her golden one, still bent over her lap.

An audible "Ahem!" sounded from the door of the back-room. Then a painstakingly got-up cough, and a clatter of strong shoes, marked a hurried retreat.

Just then came a sound of voices, and, with some bustle, a few of their party entered, Mrs. Lester and Miss Higgins foremost; the latter volubly describing how they had found shelter, and exclaiming over the wetting Mabel and Cust must have received.

"Oh, we got dried at this fire," answered Dick, with cheeriness. "And this good woman here"—(the dame was curtseying,

and setting chairs for everyone)—“has been looking well after us.”

“He, he! dear, dear; not much of that, sir—bless you for a gentleman that knows how to steal the ladies’ hearts!” and, grown bold by recent familiarities, she favoured the company with a broad, most sympathising smile—continuing, in a hearty voice, which drew all attention upon the unhappy culprits—“I must make bold to apologise, miss, for disturbing your sweetheart a minute ago; but, law! it does my very heart good to see young folks courtin’ and a-fondlin’ of each other.”

No bombshell could have produced a more disastrous effect! July’s face blazed with reproachful indignation—a titter ran amongst the rest—while Mrs. Lester grew a little white (or was it fancy; as Dick’s eyes involuntarily sought her face?). But Mabel, in her innocence, rescued her sinner companion, since no protestations of his own would, for a moment, have been credited.



"Courting! Is she doting?" asked Miss Mab of the rest in an amazed whisper, sitting bolt upright upon her stool. Then, as if a new light had suddenly dawned upon her—"Oh—I—see! Colonel Cust! Colonel Cust! She expected you to make love to *me*, and that is why she stayed discreetly behind that door for the last ten minutes. Poor soul! how disappointed she must have been. What an idea!"

Whereupon she went off into a most hearty fit of laughter, in which he at once joined her.

"You did that very well," he whispered to her some time later, when helping her into the saddle. She was somewhat shame-faced, for no one else had guessed that her share in the late episode had been a small piece of consummate acting, which acting came almost naturally to her.

"I thought it was the best thing to do, for I fancied Maud was annoyed at the old woman's nonsense," she apologetically

answered. "And, besides, it *was* absurd."

"Very absurd! Why, I feel quite as if I might be your father," he answered, with a little emphasis. Then, unable altogether to control the expression of what was uppermost in his mind—"And—I cannot say how I admire such thoughtfulness for your sister."

It grew dark early those nights. This evening the late rain had brought on twilight earlier than usual. There were deep shadows lying across the road, while a moon was rising before they were more than half way back; and if the chestnut had been well-behaved in the morning, his terrors and fits of shying were now ten-fold. Perhaps Mabel teased him too, a little, for she felt out of sorts, thinking, perhaps, as at her last picnic, of the "what had been,"—and "what might have been."

"Here comes the carriage," said Cust in uneasiness, as the sound of wheels caught

his ear. "Perhaps we had better canter on a little: he often frets at a noise behind."

Fret! Those delicate ears had already pricked up, and the tormenting sprite on his back, who was delaying him from gaining his well-beloved stable, had hardly called upon him before he was off at once. They had outstripped the others soon, and were going faster and faster through the shadows; the thud of the hoofs falling dull on the roadside grass.

"He'll be off with you! You don't know him!" called the Colonel, trying to keep up with her in vain; but, in truth, the chestnut was off from the first, and Mab—after two ineffectual pulls with all her might—knew it.

Past whirled dark hedges, and giddily the shadowed pastures seemed to swim by, while, with starting eyeballs and wide-blown nostrils, the handsome chestnut heard the footstrokes of Dick Cust's horse behind

him, and remembering bygone races, so straining his every nerve and muscle, soon distanced the pursuer.

They had left that long stretch of road behind—left the carriage and riders—in, as it seemed, two or three choking, breathless minutes. In front there was a sudden dip in the road; a sharp corner; from which the stony causeway slanted steeply too!—her heart was painfully beating.

“Will she get safely past that turn? Will he ever——”

The horse made a great effort to round it; but he was going at a terrible speed. He slipped just on the slope of that corner—and Cust saw a dark mass go down all of a heap!

In ten more seconds he was beside it and out of his saddle; when, at the same moment, with two wild flourishes of his white legs, the chestnut rose again, tossing his blazed head, and galloping down into further darkness.

"Are you hurt, Miss Langton? Are you——"

But no breath sounded, as he half raised in his arms that little figure which had been lying prone in the shadows by the rough stony roadside.

"Is she gone? My God! what will Maud say to me?" he muttered to himself, in an awe-struck whisper, as he drew her a little into the centre of the road to let the moonlight fall on the small white face which lay against his chest.

It looked like it; her eyes were closed; her teeth slightly clenched—and never a soul near to help! He called aloud—shouted—but no answer came back!

The minutes seemed ages! Would those riders *never* come? . . . and he swore, hoarsely cursing them for loitering fools; but stopped himself with a strange feeling as the last word barely escaped his lips, for in the night air's holy stillness it seemed a doubly profane thing to do. That young

girl's soul might, for aught he knew, be passing *then*—silently quitting and freeing itself from the tender body he clasped—out into the twilight around, and away, who knows how or whither, but surely into that great surrounding Space and Eternity wherein our Time and world are but hung as a ball, floating in their inconceivable immensity.

Water was not to be had. Nothing but impervious great hedges on either dark side, and wide meadows dry as steppes beyond them. At least, however, he could loosen her habit at the throat; could fan her face.

Then came—yes, it was—the welcome sound of a carriage!

Cust drew a great, deep breath of relief.

Meanwhile, the occupants of that carriage had passed the other riders, who were loitering, perhaps for reasons of their own. But in consequence of a call from Mrs. Lester, who was anxious about Mabel, a warning cry came back from the irrepressible grass-

widow, to the effect that Colonel Cust and Miss Langton had galloped off together, and would, no doubt, be on their way to Scotland before Mrs. Lester could reach the hotel.

"How very shocking! My dear Mrs. Lester, what *will* you do? Can't you telegraph?" gasped Miss Mawkesworth, in an appalled whisper; dilating her foolish brown eyes till rings of white were visible.

No response was vouchsafed by haughty Maud, who would not hear, though a contemptuous gibe came at once from the ready lips of Miss Higgins.

"But why not?" persevered the dull-brained young person, bent upon holding her own against Juliana, and sympathising with the supposed secret terror of her sweet Mrs. Lester. "I do solemnly assure you it is a *well-known* fact that he has tried to run off already with several young ladies, and *all* of them were heiress——!"

The last word was strangled in her throat. She found herself energetically hustled by

Miss Higgins, and advised—with the words hissed disagreeably close into her ear—to keep such wiseacre nonsense to herself. Meantime that strong-minded lady, who knew as much as anyone of what was working in the minds of those around her, shared the wisdom of Solomon in this, that she felt she hated fools with a hatred beyond that set apart even for the wicked.

Very soon afterwards the carriage had approached the corner. They heard Cust's shouts!—saw him holding something dark—the driver pulled up; and all sprang out, with cries and exclamations. Next Maud Lester found herself down on her knees in the road, taking Mabel from him, but not hearing a word of what he said. The rest might have closed in with the frightened curiosity most folk show in such cases, but that Juliana drove them back like sheep before her to the carriage, bidding them hunt for wine in the luncheon baskets, and arrange the cushions for Mabel.



The group in the road was alone.

Maud, for a second or so, felt her heart, as it were, stop beating; dulled, stunned with a terrible fear, whose pain, like that after a blow, she could not yet feel for some numb, merciful seconds.

She looked down into her darling's face: which, she believed, was a dead face! Her only sister; her "little one;" the childless woman's child almost! She looked dumbly—while that tall dark man towered over her in his masculine beauty, the lover of her youth, whom she could yet have loved with her very soul, but that, for this frail girl's sake, she had striven to tear the feeling from her weary, sore heart!

In her pain she moaned, looking up in his eyes. "Oh, Dick! Dick! she was all I had left; and I gave her up to you! . . . Could you not have taken better care of her?"

No answer for a moment—how could he speak? At her yearning cry the man's

love had so strongly surged up in his heart. He closed his lips—bit them—in actual deed scowling at himself to force back its expression ; while his very pulses throbbed madly at her voice. But these few words *would* burst their prison, broken, low, whispered in their strained intensity !

“ I tried my best . . . *for your sake, Maud—for yours !*”

But she never heard him, for with a low, loving little cry, she had awakened to the fact that Mabel was raising her heavy white eyelids ; had been only stunned—heavily so, perhaps—but was now coming round.

As if in a dream, Cust carried the girl to the carriage ; and next found himself riding on to warn Mrs. Langton, and to send for a doctor. If he galloped to ease his deep-stirred, tumultuous feelings, it was only what, with his strong, fierce animal passions, he was likely to do. Anyway, the sides of that honest brown horse were reeking as he threw himself off it. Striding on with

his rapid, reckless tread, he knocked in another minute at the Langtons' door.

Madame was sitting alone as he burst in upon hearing her unthinking summons; but she shrank back from the gaslight with a stifled exclamation, as he abruptly closed the door behind him, saying in suppressed excitement,

"Mrs. Langton, there is something I have come to tell you."

Even then, despite his news, her manner took him by surprise. Why did the woman seem to cower away from him with so idiotically timid an expression, making stammering efforts in answer? What—whom did that manner vaguely outline again, like a displeasing shadow from the past thrown upon his mind—like a forgotten dream hauntingly persuading us it did occur, though refusing to repeat itself?

He was in no mood to puzzle over such phantasms. He told his story quickly and clearly, knowing by hearsay, as he did, that

the step-mother before him was not likely to be unnerved by the event. But before he had barely explained, she glided out quickly past him, to make arrangements and to send for a doctor, as she hastily said.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"I never sinn'd against thee, Sweet!  
And yet last night when none could see,  
I know not . . . but from head to feet,  
I seem'd one scar of infamy."

R. BUCHANAN.

**I**T was growing late. Cust had seen his aunt, and related to her the whole accident; and now, after dining alone at a drearily long dinner-table in an empty room, hardly knew what to do with himself, being too anxious about Mabel's danger to care for the noise and jarring amusements in billiard or drawing-rooms.

The doctor must surely have left some time ago! He would go to the Langtons' room and enquire.

As he irritably pushed away his wine-glass and stepped out into the passage, the far drawing-room door opened, giving forth a glimpse of light, and a sound of song, followed by an enthusiastic ovation from the listening crowd. Probably few in there had even seen Mabel Langton among the tide of visitors ebbing and flowing to and from the hotel; yet, their mirth-making seemed heartless to him in his restless, self-accusing uneasiness.

He did not realise that could we know all of even the smallest woes under our own very roofs—far more, how many are somewhere looking death in the face with welcoming eyes *this moment*! or harder, crying from the depths of the soul, that their groping hands might only find some opening in the dead walls of a fate which seems reducing them to despair and madness!—all the while we are happily laughing, and praising life as very good—we should be, not heartless, but heart-broken.

There was no one in the Langtons' sitting-room. The old man had just gone to bed, and Mrs. Lester was with Mabel; but the servant offered to inquire upstairs after the latter, and asked him, meanwhile, to sit down. Left alone, Dick looked round him at the empty room. The atmosphere felt close, heavy with scent of pastilles; only the fire was dying out; but from the slightly open window came a draught, which swayed uncannily the Venetian blinds and the curtains.

He listlessly lifted a book from the table, a French History; opened the next—but bent down the moment after with sudden interest, for a faded pansy fluttered from its leaves, and even without seeing her name in the title-page, he could tell, remembering her old fondness for certain flowers and womanlike ways of showing such, that it was Maud's. Tall, strong man though he was, he yet bent his head, reduced to quiet weakness at the sight and touch of those

withered, velvety petals; raising them tremulously to his lips, nervous though those powerfully-shaped hands were; then, as his eyes, turned downwards, fell on the page of the book she had thus marked—a religious work; devout as her own mind—he turned away as from a sacrilege.

It required strong emotions to bring out both the best and the worst in this man. But if his darker passions were only too apparent when these were aroused, there was yet also an inner sanctuary within him for all things pure and of good report, which many, even he himself, hardly knew of.

He, the edge of whose finer feelings towards women had been so blunted in the constant contact and rough giving and taking of the world, and by the abuse of those gifts and personal advantages he had over the crowd; whom many a woman had petted and idolized with a worship he despised or disbelieved in, knowing how it could be simulated towards others; he for whom



way had always been gaily made among the crowds of lightly-laughing, mock-love-making men and women in Vanity Fair; who had glanced with such cynical knowledge at the fair, red lips and bright eyes ready to allure him here or there,—now turned away, abashed and quiet. So chivalrous was he towards this one woman, that it seemed desecration to have kissed, even reverently, what she had lightly touched.

He felt a better man even for such associations with her; felt yet more so in her presence, when his worser self seemed to leave him, and he was aware of a truth, a freshness, and purity, reviving his jaded soul. Yet always between them lay a wide gulf!

Even now that sense of separation crept over him. He knew well it was caused by a bodiless presencet! he memory of one whose features he could hardly trace through intervening years—bound to him by the strongest ties of the letter, if not of the

spirit—yet ever sundered. One who speechlessly craved so little at his hands—shelter : and some toys to enliven innocently a little the grey twilight of that poor sunless, harmless brain. Did he not still owe loyalty to the woman he called wife ? Yet for her his heart had never made one quicker beat : her voice or name could never have touched to life-flow the hundred springs of love and reverence, perfect trust and pure, high faith, which lay, only waiting to be aroused, in his soul.

Ah ! *she*—Maud—could alone do that. What terribly strong powers for good or evil over other human souls do some among mortals lightly possess !—and their effects may last throughout eternity.

Was no one coming yet ? He looked at the door in vain ; and so resting his hand upon the table, felt something small under his fingers. A canary-backed French novel—one he recognised at a glance to be delicately immodest and æsthetically sensual—lay

open, with a handkerchief thrown over it ; and beside these a ring, on which he had inadvertently placed his hand—a gipsy ring, with different stones sunk in its gold circlet.

With the vague curiosity of habit, he took it up, and examined it with indifferent eyes. Deep-coloured stones were let in all round, alternately with more hueless ones ; and, as he carelessly noticed this, some faintest memory stirred in his brain, growing stronger every moment. Where and when had he seen this ring, which seemed so strangely familiar : what remembrances came back——?

A great start ! One sudden movement, which seemed to stretch to tension all the muscles of his body, and he drew himself up to his full height, clutching the ring tightly in his hand, looking round the empty room with a weakness of surprise—yet an almost defiance of the material evidence of his senses ! What was wrong with him?—for

he felt like a terrified, unwilling wizard, raising dead things from their deep graves that night?

One shapeless spirit from the past had ghostlily flitted by him a few seconds ago; but could the phantom likenesses of inorganic things come too? Else what was this miserable trinket that he felt cutting into his palm, as his fingers closed with unconscious convulsiveness over it? What folly! He was turning coward, and it was all a mistake: he must—would—prove it to be so.

So, holding it close under the light, he scanned the stones with eagle eyes. Seven of them! He seemed to have known there would be just so many—and here—yes, here! (he knew that too) came *the ruby*. The next stone was a colourless iris; then a green chrysoprase, and an opalescent hydrophane. Under his breath he repeated mechanically the first letter of each name, for the stones came in this rotation:

Ruby.  
 Iris.  
 Chrysoprase.  
 Hydrophane.  
 Azure stone.  
 Rose quartz.  
 Diamond.

and their initial characters together made his own name—*Richard*!

Long ago it had been his own ring; a hieroglyphic one, given him when a boy by Mrs. Cust; and he remembered later wearing it on his little finger up till that hateful time in Paris, when, on the very day of his *fiançailles*, his future bride had noticed and petulantly asked for it—in something of the same tone with which a spoiled child cries for a new toy. He had not understood then the true cause of that strange importunity. He understood it all only too soon.

Wretched trifle, which yet had such power! Power to recall that maddest, most miserable episode in his whole existence, of which the sequences had made him what he

now was: a man who secretly knew his life to be a ruined thing.

Courage! He was a weak fool; so he told himself. Even though the ring did bear his name—what of that? Might not a hundred Richards have devised similar rings; and he had stumbled on such an one by what was merely a strange coincidence.

His glance fell on the handkerchief, and he joyfully seized it, for it might prove some clue; he hardly knew what. But he whiten-ed a little, and stood there stupidly, heavily, staring at the dainty, embroidered square of cambric; for the name upon it was another coincidence—the name of his wife—*Adèle*!

Stunned, confused, bewildered, he stood in that same attitude awhile, so lost to everything around that he never heard a catlike footfall come to the door; never saw a woman's pale face set in dull flaxen hair, look in, then grow irresolute—drawn to-

wards him by one feeling—dragged back by another. The latter (perhaps fear?) prevailed; and she glided upstairs as noiselessly as she had descended.

He meanwhile had dropped ring and handkerchief out of his fingers as if they scorched; and, moving heavily to the fireplace, he leant his whole weight upon it, resting on both hands. The strong man felt so weak against what assailed him: so utterly impotent against these vague and sickening doubts, memories, suggestions, associations—*what were they?*—which had so unnerved him. Would that they might only take a definable form in his brain; for then his will and reason should *crush* them!

But, no! these fears, these thoughts which mocked him so maddeningly, were undetermined, amorphous, and intangible! He could not mentally grasp them, as they passed in cloud-born images, disordered and shapeless, through his mind.

How came this ring, that name, to appear

before his startled eyes together—here? Why must he perforce recall Mrs. Langton's scared look, light hair, and oval, faded face, as he had seen her that afternoon?

Why, again, would some stray, laughing remark of Mabel's come back to him, on the brown veil with which her step-mother of late always protected her complexion: could it be—*hid her features*? And—and, to what did all this lead him . . . ? That strange resemblance! . . . Involuntarily he put up one hand to loosen his cravat: it felt so tight round his throat.

Some one was coming now—the servant? No; Maud Lester herself, who with her own thoughtfulness had slipped away to relieve the terrible anxiety under which (as she told herself with a sigh) he who loved Mabel must be labouring. She came up gently with a word of pity and sympathy in her dark, beautiful eyes, and laid her hand gently on his arm, for he looked still more stern, troubled, and strange, as he mechani-



cally turned his face towards her, than even she could have fancied the case warranted.

"She is better—is going on very well. The doctor says she was only stunned from the blow on her head, and rather shaken; but if we keep her quiet to-morrow, she will be nearly well the day after."

"She is better! . . . Who is better?" Cust spoke and looked in such a stupefied, dulled fashion that she, being surprised, half stepped backward.

He was so unlike his usual self with that loose necktie, distraught expression, and thick, difficult speech! Could it be agitation about Mabel, when there was no sufficient cause; or could he—could he have been *drinking*?

Either Cust saw her surprise, or he recovered himself, for he tried to apologise, and with a more natural utterance.

"Pray forgive me, Mrs. Lester. You must think me very strange, but I felt

slightly ill a few moments ago, and you surprised me at that moment. A mere nothing—a passing spasm. You see, your presence has banished it already.” Then he explained how he came there to inquire, and how glad he was to hear that Mabel’s accident was no worse. He was himself again, yet somehow his courtesychilled her; and though undoubtedly he did take true interest in Mabel, yet his voice lacked the ring of an anxious lover. Somehow again his hearer fancied that he might have expressed no less interest in herself.

“Good night now, Mrs. Lester. I fear you must be thinking me very inconsiderate for delaying you one moment from your sister. She could not have a better nurse, nor a more devoted one, I am certain.” He spoke slowly, with even more than his usual careful deference, as, stately and proud, he moved to the door; there a thought struck him, and he turned on his heel. “By the way, there was a ring I saw lying

about. It might get lost—do you know the owner?”

“This one? It is Mrs. Langton’s. I imagine it must be rather tight for her, as I have several times noticed her take it off,” she replied, as if it were of little consequence.

Perhaps she might have held differently, had she known the thoughts of her interlocutor half an hour later, when striding hurriedly onwards outside on the Stray—under a dark sky, over the face of which drift-clouds were scudding rapidly across a moon whose gleams only shone fitfully, showing the roads intersecting the grassy common here or there. He had rushed out into the night, feeling choked in the house; but though there was fresh enough air here in the darkness, blowing in strong, wild gusts of wind against his face, he hardly felt more relieved.

Of course he had known before that the ring was that woman’s! (Maud had but

confirmed his knowledge.) But how came she by it? What did all this mean? All the demons of doubt were madly fighting in his mind, now above, now below, overthrowing each other in wild chaos, as the tall figure wandered there; through wind-swept shadows and across moon-lit bands of road.

Sudden dashes of rain fell in heavy drops before their parent-clouds were hurried onward across the stormy sky; but he heeded the rain as little as the wind. Nay, both were welcome, for nature was for once in concord with his inner being; both roused, tumultuous, urging to break unseen bonds of law, and sweep onward in wrathful destruction of yet unknown and invisible obstacles in the paths of each. This Swiss woman's face haunted him. Yes, she *had* avoided him: and *who was she?*

In his heart he felt inclined to curse the place that had brought him first face to face with Maud; then given him such an hour as this of unnerving memories, nightmare

impressions as of *double-gangers*, wraiths seen by second sight, yet not bred from superstition. Perhaps he did so.

Again and again he tried to remember what name he had heard was Madame's before marriage; but it escaped him always. Nevertheless she should see him—and that to-morrow! He would find out how she came by it—find out everything!

Wait! Did not his grand-aunt say something this morning about her maid Lisa having known Mrs. Langton in youth? He was just then starting to ride, and had laughingly begged her to keep all gossip till evening, when he would come and sit with her. This might prove a key to the whole riddle; since often when one has stumbled accidentally upon some secret of society, but has only discovered it in part, all the missing portions will suddenly be found lying under our hands, as might so many scattered pieces of a puzzle.

He had already turned back, making

straight for the hotel across the uneven grass, but stumbling slightly now and then in his haste, for the moon was again hidden. Then he gave all at once an exclamation of relief. Her name was Wellnar! Not De Warens, nor yet Wolff—but Wellnar. Heaven be praised for it! And he went forward at a freer, swinging pace, as if a great load had dropped down there upon the dark grass off his shoulders. He was still going to see his old aunt, but only to re-assure himself, and perhaps clear up this absurd mystery which had taken such extraordinary hold upon his (no doubt) shaken nerves and fevered imagination.

Unfortunately it was later than he thought, so when he got back she was already in her bedroom. It was a terrible thing to beard that aged lady after she had retired from public view, as Cust was well aware: a cause of dire offence to see her without those means and aids by which she still sought to preserve the gradually impairing

remains of former beauty; yet it must be done. Without letting his eagerness cool, he gave three authoritative, yet respectful raps at her door. (There may be even far finer shades of difference in raps.) As he expected, a disturbance inside seemed to ensue—a sharp colloquy! Voluble French chatter was heard and fewer but decisively indignant tones. Then the door cautiously opened about half an inch, and Lisa, showing the merest slice of her person through this aperture, began a parley with the suspected Colonel.

“Did he desire to see her mistress?” Lisa was *desolate*; but it was impossible! “Madame Cust was at that moment engaged upon her devotions, and of course could not be interrupted.”

“I am engaged upon nothing of the kind! Never tell unnecessary fibs, Lisa; it is a great mistake,” broke in a haughty old voice from the interior of the room. “You may tell the Colonel that I can’t see him—

and I won't see him ; for the plain truth is, my toilette is *unmade* !”

“But *I must* see you, grannie,” called back Dick, in as high a tone as herself; knowing well that, despite the hundreds of times upon which that old lady had contradicted him, he always carried the day, through the powerful knowledge that in her heart she secretly loved being domineered over by him. “I want your advice—I must consult you to-night. Never mind toilette ; I am certain you would look well in anything.”

And he followed up the effect of the latter words by some beseeching by-play with Lisa through the slit of observation.

There was a pause and some coughs. Curiosity is very mighty, and the garrison was yielding. Lisa was addressed, however; for the Colonel, being in disgrace, dignity was less impaired by treating with a third party: the surrender was also made in the most formal of tones.



"I have changed my mind, my good Lisa. I shall speak to the Colonel, if only to tell him plainly what I think of such very unceremonious interruptions—but not yet for a minute; he may wait."

So Cust waited; but when, after a few seconds, he was admitted, the sight that met his eyes was so appalling it required all his worldly tact in control of features to suppress any show of surprise. His grand-aunt was absolutely invisible, but for her nose and eyes; all else—head, hands—being completely hidden—fearfully and mysteriously covered and enveloped in anti-rheumatic wrappings. In fact, as she sat in a deep arm-chair, she somewhat resembled a mummy, swathed in white grave-clothes, and propped up there by some mysterious freak. He was discreet and courteous, however, so sitting down beside her, apologised with respect as Lisa departed.

"I should not have come here but that I was uneasy, and could not understand

something connected with the Langtons."

He passed his hand through his hair with a troubled expression, reflecting his late state of mind, and at once her heart was touched.

"She is no worse, is she, my dear Dick? Our poor little Mabel!" and a withered hand stole out gently from its coverings, to stroke his own in affection.

"You are wrong, grannie. It is not that which is amiss; I am very glad to say she is going on well. No. Don't ask me my reasons; but can you tell me anything about that woman—about Mrs. Langton—who and what she was? Something makes me very anxious to know."

"My dear boy, I know so little—a stupid old woman like me! I can only tell you what Lisa was saying," answered his slightly bewildered grandaunt, feeling some disappointment.

"What Lisa said? Yes—yes. What was that?"

"A mere nothing, Dick; yet such trifles have occasionally a grain of importance in them."

She added the last reflection with a touch of petty shrewdness, which, though feminine, happened not to be misplaced this time.

"Lisa was greatly struck by Mrs. Langton's resemblance to a girl with whom she was at school in Strasbourg, and would have fancied her the same person, but that her friend was in a much lower class of life."

"And the name?"

"Was Wolff, she said. I really forget the Christian name, but the surname was certainly Wolff. . . . Dick, Dick! what is wrong? What can this woman's antecedents possibly signify to you, my own boy? . . . I see—I see; you do not think her a fit step-mother for Mabel."

For though he tried to conceal it, his face had changed—darkened terribly into blackness.

"Good night, grannie. . . . I can't—I

can't explain now. . . . Some other time, perhaps, I may come, as usual, for your advice."

The next minute he had left the poor old lady alone. He could have restrained himself no longer; and, as it was, those last words were the hardest he had ever consecutively uttered in his life.

There are moments which cannot be fitly described. If Cust's former sickening apprehensions of—he scarce knew what! his confused doubts, and tormenting bewilderment, were miserable, his then state of mind was blissful compared with these present fires of purgatory.

*Adèle Wolff, his wife, had been brought up at Strasbourg!* He remembered, with only too fatal clearness, when her old nurse Marguerite had told him so; and told him her whole history besides. His doubts, his associations of mind were now strengthened—increased! If the demons had been abroad before, one hundred devils seemed

now let loose in his soul. . . . It was—it must be—*she* ! Nay, what utter madness—what wildest folly ! *How could it be ?*”

She, whom he had left a gentle idiot, to have become a very serpent of cunning : so babyishly simple then, yet now so practised an actress ; able for such dissimulation !

And yet again, how startlingly it all came back to him !—face, voice, fair hair—all ! all were hers ! . . . . What maddening anger at thoughts of such extraordinary deception, of which he had been the fool and dupe, flashed through his brain ; blinding his eyesight like red lightning, so that, while the paroxysm lasted, he staggered and was giddy ! Then, as, with returning senses, impossibilities rose in plainest contradiction, staring him in the face, what writhing efforts to solve the mystery, dragging him round in horribly circling thought, ever recurring to where he started, as if bound helplessly to Ixion's wheel !

Where was truth : and what woman

could be believed in? Who indeed, when she—in whom, after Maud Lester had broken faith with him, he had told himself, with a bitter sneer, he could at least repose some trust; for the same reason that causes *crétins* to be named after Christians, and such stricken and verily guileless fellow-creatures with us to have been styled “innocents”—when she could be living here, shunning and avoiding him with such Jesuitical care?

Was that story partly an imposture, then? For that this was the cunning of lunacy he knew could not be the case . . .

Again, and yet again, he sifted the evidence; the ring, name; her fear of him; the education at Strasbourg! Strongest of all, the distinct, undoubted resemblance—he wearied, goaded, racked his brains over it. Perhaps a thought of possible avenging consequences crossed his mind. He would have been more than human otherwise; and Dick Cust was very human . . . Could it

be? How could it be? . . . . Then again followed the almost ungovernable anger, blessed relieving doubt, torturing confirmation. He never thought of how time went throughout that long night . . . . But the cold, grey, shivering light of dawn had long come when at last he flung himself, all dressed, upon his bed, where poor Jock, his collie, dragged himself close up to him and licked his hand.

## CHAPTER IX.

“When fired by fever’s phantom chase,  
We fling aside the curtain’s fold,  
It shows a face—a pitying face—  
But ah! to us its cast seems cold,  
And, with our last remains of pride,  
We vainly strive our pain to hide.”

BETHUNE.

“**H**OW is she doing?—well? Please don’t consider me an impertinent busybody, for, you know, I really am anxious.”

So said Juliana, in a whisper, to Mrs. Lester, at the door of Mabel’s bed-room.

“I trust she is much better, for she has fallen asleep at last. And I do thank you, my dear Miss Higgins, for your real interest in her—my poor little Mab!”



("Poor little wretch!")

This was the silent expression of July's genuine sympathy; it was much more genuine than elegant, however, so she suppressed it, only asking—

"You are not going to sit up all night yourself?"

"Certainly I shall stay with her for part of the night; then, if I am very tired, I have promised to awaken her maid," answered Mrs. Lester; who, somewhat lethargic, and of a yielding nature, was even then struggling against heavy closing eyelids.

"I'll sit up too a little. Don't refuse now, there's a good soul! I assure you I can be very quiet when I please." She whispered so eagerly, putting her hand on Maud's shoulder in her warmth, that the latter could not refuse. Indeed she felt inwardly all the stronger for having a companion in the night watches, who was so full of vigorous animal health and spirits, which seemed infectious to those around her.

So they sat up together, carefully shading the light, and talking in whispers; growing confidential and a little melancholy, as women do at such an hour and under similar circumstances; July bending forward in her favourite attitude, her head on her hands, and her elbows on her knees. She was grumbling against life in general amongst the human kind; with a little sore earnest but more grim humour, which might have been broader, perhaps somewhat vulgar, had Maud's presence not always acted as a refining influence on those around her.

All of beauty and goodness in her own mind seemed, by some law of attraction, to bring to the surface what trace of gold there was in others; and Juliana's kind, hearty, but unpolished nature dimly felt it so.

"After all, life seems just half luck and half disorder; don't you agree in your heart with me?" she said at last, fixing her eyes on her companion, and rocking backwards and forwards as she nursed her knees. But

Mrs. Lester did not agree. Even in jest she would not allow herself to question the purpose of almost trivial events in her own life: these to her, as she looked back, seemed all parts of a law of order which already, though still dark, she could dimly discern; and she said so, adding—

“Yes; many things I fretted over in bygone days have done me far more good than could ever others, I longed for, thinking them real blessings denied me.”

“But the process of being done good to is so *horribly* disagreeable,” objected her companion, with a pitiful, half-real groan. “Now you might like to live all your life over again; but I don’t believe your sister or I would ask more than a few choice red-letter days, if we had the chance.”

“Nor I either,” slowly answered Maud. “Even enjoying it to the most one can—even if one could feel working one’s very best at whatever was given one to do—still to go through all these long years again

always looking forward, forward!—it would be terrible, I think. In the daylight it all seems pleasant; but sometimes at night,” her voice gently sank, “sometimes then the best thing in it seems the leaving it.”

“It’s well to look forward to the end of one’s journey as calmly as you do, at all events, Mrs. Lester. Why, heaps of us—I myself for instance—would be in the blues directly if we thought of more than a stage ahead—and even then all we hope for is better fun and livelier companions on the way! Bless me! How common-place and low-minded you must think me——”

Mabel stirred uneasily, and both were hushed for a few minutes; then Juliana went on cautiously, in a burst of whispered confidence.

“I’ll tell you what it is, Mrs. Lester (though I’ve never yet said as much to anyone), my poor old father lets me know more of his private affairs and worries than he does the rest; and I should not wonder

if before long things went hard with us. I've known it for some time; but we want to let the poor old lady and the girls enjoy themselves while they can. If trouble does come, I'll turn out first and work for my own bread. The old people always gave me the best while they had anything, so it's but fair to let the rest have my share now. After all, I am so sick of a do-nothing life, I would rather like some good, honest drudgery with one's fingers; but there isn't *any* to take to, I do believe! I'm not fit for a governess, and it will be hard to break my temper and keep down my tongue as a companion—still I suppose it must be done." (There was something like a shake in her hearty voice.) "You would give me a helping hand, maybe, Mrs. Lester. I'm not shy about asking, you see; but I declare I would not be more backward at doing as much for another."

"My dear, I trust it may not come to that; but if it should, I will certainly help

you to the utmost," warmly answered Maud ; who in her exclusiveness might hardly have used the term of endearment, but for that call on her sympathy. None had ever then found her private feelings bar the way.

"Lucky that I'm old enough not to mind giving up all notions of marrying," went on Juliana, with something like a sigh. "Well, well ! We have all had our little stories, I suppose ; but that sort of thing ought not to last too long, ought it ? Some women's devotion only makes them miserable, I think ; but neither does burying themselves in learning seem to make men much happier—look at old Mr. Langton !"

Mrs. Lester sighed.

"I suppose the truth is, we *must* remember the soul is supreme ; or our love proves a cross to us. We dare no more make a religion of the heart than of the intellect with impunity."

Juliana looked up at her for a moment with surprise. Soft, slow words of comfort,

sweet-voiced nothings, which anyone might unthinkingly utter, were in general the limits of Maud Lester's conversation, though her fascination of manner and tender womanliness gave to such an additional charm which made them at times beautiful in the ears of her hearers.

Now she had said something which sounded almost wise. But then the subject was one that this fair, loving, but not very clever woman, had often thought over; so her mouth spoke out of the fulness of her heart. She, too, like many women, had once had a secret religion, a heart-worship, whose small occasional sacrificial rites had given her, as to her fellow-sisters, more happiness than a feast-day in her own honour: a religion whose attendant thoughts, hopes, yearnings, and ponderings had required from her a daily service of mind and heart, of strength and soul.

And what had been the end of it all? Her punishment had come; as she told her-

self now it must have come, sooner or later ; if not in the pain of giving up her love and putting it from her, yet in some other way, —even had she married Richard Newland. And she had not rebelled against her trouble, but had meekly bowed her head, till after a time her sorrow passed away ; while she then recognised the truth of the old proverb—the essence of the wisdom and experience of those who have lived and died before us—that, “The way to heaven is by Weeping Cross.”

Now the old pain, the old heartache, had come back to her after all these long years—but she was stronger to bear it. Yet at times she wondered vaguely how it was that this love which she had thought to have left far behind her on her way through life, should start up again to attack and disturb the calm peace of her added years. Fresh interests and objects to care for, new chastening sorrows, she had expected would visit her to her life's end ; and was happy—be-



lieving in her large faith that each would leave her only the stronger—but Love! Ought it not to have passed by her widow's weeds, visiting gaily younger, fresher hearts? She blushed at herself, for her sense of weakness in her loneliness ought surely only to belong to clinging, helpless girlhood. Ah! too, how could she, older, staid, have been even for one moment in secret thought a rival to the little sister whose second mother and guardian angel that innocent young heart believed her to be?

There was a movement—a suppressed cry from Mabel in her dreams; the painful utterance of some fevered terror. A second long-drawn sob broke loose with difficulty from the spell of sleep. Both women stood over her as she awoke, looking at them with wide, scared eyes, over which a film still seemed drawn; then stretching out her hands imploringly, and gasping in her semi-delirium, "Stop the horse! Oh! stop him! He has thrown . . . . *do* you not see?—

. . . thrown *him* ! Has he not ? Oh ! I thought he had thrown him."

Mrs. Lester tried to quiet and soothe her, as one would a terrified child still suffering from some great fright, holding those burning hands in her own cool, larger, motherly ones. But nevertheless, Mab still looked round wildly, apparently seeing more than they did ; talking rapidly, as if raving—indeed which she was doing, for the blow on her head had been severe.

"He rode him—the chestnut, you know ! . . . when was it ? Long ago—and that was why I would . . . Ah ! only because he had !—only because he had !"

Was she going to betray her love for Richard Cust before a stranger ? Maud, at her wits' end, looked round, dreading lest by appearing to shield her charge she should only add importance to these feverish utterances—yet longing to be rid of Juliana, who was broadly listening with kind-hearted, but ill-bred eagerness ; with

"both her ears," as she would herself have said. But Mabel would not stop. She was gesticulating again; the slender white figure quivering under her strong excitement.

"You are all cruel!—all of you. Why will you not tell me? . . . He *was* thrown—is killed! . . . No! no! But he is gone away, and I shall never see him any more."

She burst out weeping, with a little pitiful cry, that went straight to the hearts of her hearers.

"Mab! Mab! hush, my darling. He is not killed; he never was thrown. You will see Colonel Cust to-morrow, and he is quite, quite well," cried poor Maud; then, turning in her perplexity with a vain effort to hoodwink Juliana, "She is in fever, you know. And people in fever always say the opposite of what they would were they well—is it not strange? Oh yes! always."

But Mabel had turned from her; breaking loose from those loving arms. Trembling weakly from the terrors of her deli-

rium, perhaps also with the actual past fright from which her shattered nerves could not rally, she had buried her pretty head in the pillows, sobbing only—

“Leave me—leave me. You don’t understand ; no one does.”

“Let me come there beside her. She doesn’t mean Colonel Cust, and she isn’t talking opposites!” And Juliana elbowed Mrs. Lester aside ; who looked at her in confused amazement. “You mean Wat Huntley, dear—don’t you ; Captain Huntley ? Yes ; he rode that horse, but he was never thrown. You mean him, don’t you ?”

The girl raised her head ever so slightly, just showing a pale, quivering face and swimming eyes.

“Yes—*Walter* . . . But he is gone !” And her face was hidden again.

“It can’t be !—it is all a mistake !” cried Maud, with a great catch in her breath, in her excitement grasping the other’s arm more tightly than she knew.

"Ei-i! Don't pinch me, Mrs. Lester. *It can be—and it is!* Listen, Mabel, dear," she gabbled on, stammering in her kindly eagerness. "Don't cry now—you must get well to look nice when he comes back. He is coming back. You are ill now, or you would have known that. Oh, yes! coming back at once—take my word for it."

Like the mere child which fever, weakness, and the reaction after hidden excitement and grief of late, had made her, Mabel, partly exhausted, partly quieted, gradually dropped her heavy eyelids. Juliana drew away, and signed to Mrs. Lester also; then gave one triumphant whisper—

"*I told you so!*"

Maud still looked at her with dulled wonder. All was beginning to dawn in her mind; but how could she credit—how dared she believe in such a happiness!

"You don't mean that—that——" she ejaculated, looking piteously at the other

woman, who, in her heart-whole vigour, wondered laughingly at her perplexity.

"That she likes Captain Humbley? Yes; of course I do. Why should she not, I'd like to know? I was not certain of it before, though we all knew he idolised the very ground under her feet. Why should she not like him, pray?"

"I don't know, my dear—I am sure I do not know—but it is all so sudden, and I never guessed it. My poor Mabel!—I would have acted so differently!" piteously uttered Maud Lester, in her great bewilderment and joy, akin to heartache; her whole face changing, glowing in darkly, rosy brunette tints, then paling.

It was now impossible to let Agnes sit up, lest she might also be witness to such self-betrays of her little mistress. Tired though she was, Mrs. Lester would do so herself. Juliana said nothing against this, but betook herself to her own room, where she might have been seen scrawling

hastily a very ill-written, blotted letter.

There was a carousal that night somewhere in the regions of the servants' apartments, to which lucky fact it may have been owed that the fascinating Mr. Delany was found—still very much awake—by a messenger she despatched. He had been civil to her several times, which, as she told him, was the reason she entrusted him with a letter, to be sent as soon as letter could go; being of the greatest importance both to his master the Colonel and Captain Huntley. Mr. Delany's profound gratification at this mark of her confidence was ineffable; and, well satisfied, she returned to Mabel's apartment, where poor Mrs. Lester stared at her with blinking, heavy eyes. As usual, July settled matters after her own fashion, and was soon left in sole possession of the room.

## CHAPTER X.

“Clutching the red grapes  
Of passion or power—  
Ah, they were wild grapes,  
Cankered and sour !  
Would we call back those years,  
Strange, ghostly throng ?”  
*Author of “John Halifax, Gentleman.”*

MADAME too had had a wakeful night. Her sick, age-stricken husband was even worse than usual, and this morning found her walking up and down her own room—for hers was separate, though opening off his,—thinking out her plans. As usual, she was pacing backwards and forwards swiftly but quietly, as a she-wolf might



prowl. The habit was so necessary to her, that the carpet of her room at Cherrybank was worn in a regular track.

Despite her weary night's watching, her heart was excited and lifted up within her, for things were all moving so rapidly towards the end she worked and longed for. No more dull, plodding days then; one like another! No more conventionalities, proprieties, sickening forms of a worn-out religion, to be paced through, to satisfy these fat-souled English Philistines; but freedom!—freedom! Liberty and license; money, power. *Life* all around her; rapid, dangerous, intoxicating. New scenes, changes, each day and hour; glorious secret plots; maddening outbursts of those great minds whose visions she shared. *Then!* then! perhaps, insurrections; streets swept by cannon; barricades, fire, blood! Ha! what wild exultation!

Rank, despotism; crowns, mitres; religion, rulers—all, all to be hurled, trampled, spurn-

ed in the gutters by the feet of those free avenging ones whose hearts answered to hearts all over the world: biding their time in want and beggary—but ready to answer their brethren whenever the watch-word should be flashed along the electric current which united their souls.

She looked at her face in the glass, and smiled at the dark-red flush on her usually sallow cheeks, feeling that at that moment she was living, not acting.

“Ah! what a soul is mine!” she said to herself, with a sigh of admiration, yet self-pity that such light should be hid under a bushel. “What is there divine in us except such *grandes émotions*? Look at these fools, like cakes of dough, all around me; eating, sleeping, marrying, praying, for no reason but that their fathers did just the same before them. Can they understand our free minds, who, springing from the earth, enjoy unbridled its good things while life lasts, until we sink back into that earth again. Speak

to them of a *grande passion*! Bah! They answer, with shocked looks on their clean-shaven British faces, of petty barriers over which our spirits soar as free as the wind above the Vosges. And which of them could understand my intellect—my aspirations to free the world?”

Here her thoughts broke, for what her aspirations were, was hardly defined to herself. She had followed so many masters who held varying doctrines, as to republicanism, socialism, and communism, that the ultimate form of freedom was vague to her mind. No matter; the unselfishness of such strivings for humanity, and not for her private benefit, awed even herself.

“Yet I have a heart,” she said, in an undertone of admiring surprise. “What a heart! So tender, passionate, susceptible. Ah! poor heart, none ever understood thee. Will this cold Englishman, Richard Newland, ever feel for thee?”

Was her old fancy for him really return-

ing, then? Well, well, a few days should decide her future. She must hurry up the old man to London for his health; and it would no doubt be good for his soul also to make her a charming will. Then they would bury him with decent mummery, and she would flee gladly to the Continent, having spoiled the Egyptians, taking Mabel with her, too, as her slave-maid.

And then Mrs. Langton's mind strayed back to reminiscences of her chequered life.

First, the quiet school at Strasbourg; next, wanderings with her father through strange lands, the delights of gambling, the secret cheating in which she had been his constant accomplice; lastly, more daring crimes. She thought of much with anger, for the old man had made her his tool, and had lastly deceived her. Lucky for her that he had been transported—else she could never have shaken him off. And then her exciting life had begun. Soon she should

return to its joys, and the Bohemian blood within her warmed at the memory of wild, gay parties in scantily furnished attics, where you could hardly distinguish the rough beards of many a free-souled vagrant for the thick smoke. Evenings when the dice rattled, glasses clinked, and freedom was the password ; even to the catches and songs which all screamed out in chorus, till, springing to their feet, they would make walls and ceilings shake and re-echo with their refrains as they danced round in a maddened, frenzied circle.

“ A—h ! . . . Ah ! What days—what times ! ”

*Peste !* the doctor was coming ; she must go downstairs. Just as she reached their sitting-room she saw Delany, Colonel Cust's servant, loitering suspiciously in the passage, and long-taught caution seemed to warn her all was not safe in that quarter.

Could the Colonel have remarked her confusion yesterday evening when he had

come upon her unawares? What then? After all, she was sick to death of always avoiding him. Were they to meet, she would but have fresh cause for plans and ingenuity; and *what* pleasure was equal to circumventing people? She feared him, certainly; yet had she not equal power over him? If he came, there must be war to the knife, and——!

There was a short, sudden knock at the door. Quick as lightning, feeling who it was, she dropped the blind she had just been raising, leaving the room sombre as Cust entered.

He looked stern and haggard, with the blackness as of a thunder-cloud in his expression; and as he closed the door behind him, he stopped short for a moment's pause—one moment or so—to collect himself. She calmly smiled, curtsying slightly, with a fawning gesture of the hand in reception, looking him quietly in the face.

In that second's pause the great doubt of

last night seized him again in its thrall ! Irresolution swept away at once the whole morning's stern work—all he had planned to do and say, to force an explanation with this wicked, calm, faded woman. Till his servant told him she was alone, he had bided his time to confront her in his wrath, to hurl his invectives at her false face ; first asking, with the terrible force of one who has absolute power, and means unsparingly to use it, "*Adèle ! . . . .* I know you ! Are not you that woman whom, in my boyish folly, I entrusted with the care of my name and my honour ? How dare you answer to God and men for being here as the wife of this old man ? Why, in heaven's name, did you sham idiotcy at our marriage ?"

He had, from his heart, believed her to be one of those unhappy beings in whose lamps no flame of intellect can ever burn on earth ; who must walk darkling through this world, till, at the threshold of another, their light shall rise.

Why had she left the home and creature comforts he had provided, to wander out into the world as a governess, and marry this poor, dying old man? But—*was it she?* Still he stood uncertain, and she knew she had gained some advantage.

"I suppose I owe this kind visit to a wish to inquire after our invalid—dear Mabel?" she began, in gentle tones.

"You are wrong—Madame," was the stern answer, as he tried to collect himself. "My visit is to you—*alone*."

The battle had begun in earnest; both looked each other steadily in the face; Madame seated herself in front of him. Cust, though she pointed to a chair, remained standing still looking down at her, resting one head heavily on the cabinet.

"You are very flattering, monsieur. My husband is unfortunately ill this morning, and we expect the doctor soon."

"Your *husband*, madame, ought to appre-



ciate the sense of duty and the virtues of—his—wife.”

What perfect self-possession that woman had ! Whether that shot told or not, she never winced ; yet all—all—voice, face, hair, though aged and altered, seemed so to recall the girl of fourteen years ago, that anger began almost to overmaster him, though it *must* be kept down. Yet in his heart he admired her pluck.

“ It seems strange, madame, that, excepting last night, you and I should never have met, though we have been so many days together in this house,” he went on in a quiet, ~~deep~~ tone, which, she felt, boded very evil things.

“ You forget, M. le Colonel ”—with a cool smile,—“ we enjoyed one charming picnic together.”

“ One, yes, when, either by chance or not I hardly saw you all day . . . the more strange, since last night convinced me of what I might have guessed sooner, had you

not—you will allow me to say—avoided me.”

Till now he had kept quiet, but suddenly the Newland anger got the upper hand—his whole voice and manner changed. The woman quailed, and drew back as that passion lit his eyes, darkened and lined his brow with furrows, while, standing over her, with one hand on the table, the force and fury of the tempest in his soul burst in passion from his lips.

“Will you deny that you know me? Madame—Wellnar! Wolff! Warens! or whatever other false name you assume to hide your own *now!* . . . You knew, but did not *dare to meet me!*—me—whom you have duped, deceived, dishonoured; Heaven knows why! . . . Wretched woman, what infernal plans have you been concocting for the ruin of this poor old man too, and his innocent, pure little daughter? . . . Was it not enough to have destroyed my chances of happiness—to have made me curse the

day when I first was shown your deceiving face? . . . It is fourteen years since we parted; but you see I could not forget you," he went on, with a bitterness which found its best outlet in grim irony. "See how strong our affection must have been, when I recognized you, even after a all these years and changes!"

But she mistook him, either wilfully or verily; and starting up with a half-suppressed cry, threw herself abjectly at his feet, winding her arms round his knees, while she exclaimed in French,

"Oh, Richard! Oh, my heart, my well-beloved! Yes, yes; it is true. I loved you with passion, with vehemence, as none of your cold-blooded islanders can; but I thought you had despised me—not chosen me—never cared to see my face again."

Such a rush of abhorrence, anger, and loathing came over him, as one hates the touch of some living thing repulsive to our nature, that, had she been a man, he would

have flung him off, tearing himself loose in his passion.

But she was a woman. He had to clench his hands, holding his straightened, powerful arms a little behind him, in very fear that if he then touched her, animal anger might blind him, and he should do her some injury by his rude grasp.

Then he took her by the wrists, saying quietly enough but hoarsely, some disgust still in his voice,

"Get up; get up—don't crouch there like that!"

She caught the intonation, and at its sound the faint weakness of inclination for him she had half felt, half imagined, died away. She rose, feeling his equal by its death.

"You *must—you shall* give me a full explanation! A full one—and that this very day—now!"

"Naturally. I have every intention of doing so."

"No more deceptions! No more of such accursed plots!" he reiterated between his teeth, nursing his anger; while she, on the other hand, pale, demure, composed, returned answers which by their quietness seemed to fall on the fire of his wrath-like cold trickles of water.

"I presume you do not want all the people here to gossip—about this matter—this quarrel. I may be used to such scandal; you may not mind it; but you will perhaps care to consider the feelings of Mabel—of Mrs. Lester—of old Mr. Langton."

How was it that she could be so self-possessed? He wished that she were not, for his anger was incomprehensibly waning far too rapidly, for want of some fuel to keep its fierce momentary flame alight. With a man opposed to him, a look of the eye, a gibe—any retort—would have sufficed at such times to make anger overleap the bounds of reason, and forget the greater primary offence in the momentary insult.

But there was nothing at which his fiery temper could take umbrage in the resigned demeanour of this faded woman, who stood with drooped eyelids opposite him.

Though he had just loathed her fawning, her false and fulsome show of attachment to himself—yet that over, he could be fair, and even generous, to one he believed in his power. And strangely enough the great wrong of her deception throughout all these years could not raise a second storm just then within him, as might a smaller, quite recent offence. Great past injuries were to him much easier to forgive than far more petty ones—was it because harder to realize and grasp in their entirety?

“You do not even seem to understand our positions towards one another,” he said, still looking at, and unable to comprehend her. “Do you not know—can you not imagine, at least, what this poor old man will feel when I tell him who you are—as *I will!*”

"I do not understand what is this great harm I seem to have done you," Madame answered quietly, in a tone of such sincerity as to her want of apprehension, that it staggered him. "I do not," she went on, raising her eyebrows a little in her low forehead, with a faint deprecation in that gesture and the movement of her shoulders. "You did not like me your own self; you did not care ever to see me again. To me it seems even a very good matter for you that I should be so well placed as I am . . . Hush! here comes the doctor."

Like a daylight phantom, she passed him with a noiseless rush, and meeting that individual, who was just then announced by the waiter, detained him at the door, spoke hurriedly of her husband's bad symptoms, and of her wish the doctor should see him without one instant's delay.

Then, gliding back to Cust, who stood stupidly staring after her, as if in a dream, she whispered energetically into his ear,

"You must *not* trouble this unhappy old man to-day. He is too feeble and sick—you cannot have the heart—you can NOT! This evening, after dinner, when he is asleep, when I am free from nursing him and Mabel, then you shall hear all—all; and perhaps be very grateful to me."

She had come and gone, and now he heard her discoursing with the doctor in low sighing tones, as she led him upstairs. What was she—hypocrite, lunatic, deceiver?—or did she simply mean what she had said and implied, that she could not see she had done him harm, but rather with her lights thought it a good?

To-night, this evening, would show. Till then, though undoubtedly foiled for the present, he was almost glad to have time to collect himself, to get rid of his bewilderment and confusion of mind. She seemed so cool that it had upset all his plans (though these indeed had been of the vaguest). Yes; now he could think it over



and strengthen himself in whatever resolutions he should find right and fitting to take,—and no wiles nor affected calm might *then* avail her, once he had made up his mind!

## CHAPTER XI.

"Vultures, who build your bowers  
 High in the Future's towers !  
 Withered hopes on hopes are spread ;  
 Dying joys choked by the dead,  
 Will serve your beaks for prey  
 Many a day."

SHELLEY.

**M**ADAME had kept her senses sufficient-  
 ly collected while the doctor was  
 visiting her old husband. Busy as was  
 her mind with scheming, plotting, planning,  
 daring, every moment she could snatch  
 from the immediate calls made upon her  
 attention, she was yet able to understand  
 the grave meaning of the medical man's  
 questions and looks. And no wife could  
 be turned away with an air of more

simple, quiet grief, when she had put a certain question to him with faltering hesitation, and he had answered :

“Three weeks, at the most, if great care is taken of him—at the most, I fear, my dear lady.”

And what of Mabel ? In spite of Madame's natural sorrow at news which she yet owned was not altogether unexpected, she must not omit care for that poor dear one. The doctor, who had just seen the latter, gave his opinion that she must be kept quiet for a day or so, without movement or excitement; otherwise there might be a relapse into more serious illness.

Ah, so ! How attentive and grave was Mrs. Langton whilst this long visit lasted ; but at last she was free—at last he had taken his leave !

Then dull decorum was flung aside. She was alone within the four walls of her room, with only her own interests to consult, her own wits to aid and advise her, as she

pushed back the smooth hair from her throbbing forehead, and with a gleaming, peculiar light in her small eyes, and dark-flushed, long face, rapidly glanced over the whole position, and thought and thought till her brain reeled, refusing to aid her further in disentangling the web.

No matter. Her plan of action was decided for the time being. Later on she could but trust to luck and to her own powers to help her out of fresh difficulties. Sufficient for the day was the evil thereof. Turn and twist, if suddenly attacked, she could with the quickness of that beast into which the Father of Evil once entered; but she had not the head to sketch out a bold plan for the future. She had not sufficient grandeur of idea, as she told herself with regret; she had an elevated soul of the highest order for beautiful aspirations, but, alas! not for powerful constructive imagination.

After a time she rose quickly, pulled a

small trunk into the centre of the room, and with swift, determined hands began selecting and noiselessly packing some clothes for herself and her husband. She did not put up very much—"but there is enough for a week," she said to herself. Then, when finished, the trunk was pushed back to its place again, lest Hitchcocks should remark it, and she went straight to Mabel's room.

Poor little Mab! She looked so innocent, weak, but unusually gentle, as she sat, propped up with pillows, her beautiful hair all drawn back from her face, and coiled closely to her head. In her liquid, shining eyes were conflicting gleams, crossing and re-crossing each other, as thoughts half-shamed struggled with others wholly glad in turn for mastery. At such times her mouth would break into an involuntary sweet, guileless, child's smile; then her eyelids would droop to hide the happy light in her eyes, while a soft bloom rose, tinging her cheeks, deepened and died away. And

the burden in her mind was, "He is coming back—coming back! I shall see him soon again!"

For that morning Juliana had had a talk with her, causing this shame, yet joy; because her two watchers of the past night had found out all about it, and believed her to be—appalling thought—in love! The very idea made her blush, even when by herself: it seemed so to alter her position; to make her older—worthy of a certain deference—since the dignity of romance wherewith she had shyly invested others in her inmost mind, was now given to her also. Startling as it seemed, with a something of flattery in it which frightened, yet pleased, had not these two elder women acknowledged it—they who had treated her as a child yesterday?

"I always warned you, you were a little flirt, you know," had ended Miss Higgins. "Lucky for you both to have a friend like me! Oh, you need never be asking ques-

tions; but mark my words (though you don't deserve it)—he'll be back here, perhaps to-morrow."

Left alone, Mab was too weak, and also too joyful, to realise it all. She only went over the past in snatches of happy dreaminess; the hard old life; then coming here and meeting him; the growth of that strange, sweet attraction; last, her fears and doubts of him, his sorrowful eyes that night before he went, her wretchedness since; but now,—why, the whole matter seemed understood, and even not thought startling by others. And in her sister's kiss and comforting face, and her friend's plainer words, lay assurance all would be right.

How right? she never asked. *That*, he would settle who seemed always to understand and care for her better than anyone else! And she thought of him again and again; of his unhandsome face and his kindly ways, to which her heart warmed more than ever.

Would the outside world think little of this, her choice, were the secret guessed?

She was clear-sighted enough to imagine that many might, and deep down in her mind was already indignant with them, loving him all the better for it.

Without handsomeness; without, as yet, well-known talents; without good fortune, what mattered all that? Were there not better things—qualities, attributes, which she could hardly define in her confused enthusiasm; a nobility, unselfishness, perfect sweet kindness, beneath that mere outmost rough husk? *She* knew it, if no one else! And what signified their acknowledgment? for she was a selfish little mortal in her love, preferring to lavish in secret her brimming measures of affection on that which she alone possessed and saw beauty in, while others passed by unheeding where she gloated over her treasure.

Are there not times when the bodily part of us is more open to unseen external in-



fluences of climate and atmosphere, either hurtful or healthy? There are also times when our psychical natures may be so relaxed by the warmth of happiness that we are equally open to impressions brought to bear upon us; answering these with a sympathy, a generosity amounting perhaps to weakness, to whose influence at other times the more hardened pores of our souls would be closed.

It was in such a frame of soft, all but tearful happiness that Mrs. Langton found her step-daughter when she entered; and guessing something of this by some unholy wisdom, she was not slow to seize the favourable occasion.

"Tired and weary! I may well be that," she coldly murmured, in answer to observations on her flushed, nervous appearance, made with more sympathy than was usually given to her by Mabel, or indeed than she would have generally accepted. "Your father was so ill—so ill! And he asks but

for you—you—you! while I am nothing. No. I feel *too* exhausted," and wiping, as if ashamedly loth to give way, her wet eyes, she dropped into a low chair, putting her hand to her temples.

"Poor papa!" cried the girl, moved by thinking he had asked for her, as Madame knew she would be; though in reality the aged Miles Langton had slept the dreamless sleep of such exhausted natures. "If it had not been for this accident I could have nursed him—and helped you." (The last was an after-thought.)

"Ah! *if* it had not been . . . and to-day too when I do so want your presence to satisfy him. Ought I to tell you, I wonder? But no, you are too weak! . . . and yet his health regards you more than any other."

"Yes, yes; so it does.—Oh, pray tell me what is the matter," cried Mabel, starting up in painful eagerness, for her stepmother's tones of reluctance, yet wavering, were wilily

calculated to alarm her, far more than the mere words.

"*Eh bien!* dear child, be calm, or they will say I should not have told you. It is that he must be taken to London this very evening to see a doctor: a particular one. He has slept all day, and he will be stronger and wakeful to-night; while I—I am worn out! If you could have come, he would have been so much easier to manage," ended Madame, with a touch of pity for herself, which sounded most unassumed.

Go! why should she not go? Mabel begged, prayed, entreated; stood up to show how strong she was, and tried to believe it was only staying too long in bed which had made her giddy. The thought that the poor old man did want her—now—at last! so touched her, after years of longing for it, that she trembled lest he might be taken away alone among strangers; for who knew (ah! who knew?) what might be the end of this illness?

A heavy presentiment laid its leaden weight upon her, though she would not ask herself what that fear was.

Madame looked at the slight figure that was shaking with excitement; then, in a burst of generous feeling, said she should have her wish. Mrs. Lester might not forgive her; others might think it weak; but at least Mabel herself would be grateful.

"Oh, yes, *so* grateful!" cried poor Mabel, with tears in her eyes, ready to kiss her for the favour; and Mrs. Langton did indeed drop a Judas touch of her thin lips on that childlike forehead.

Then, their new bond being thus sealed, Mabel agreed not to tell Mrs. Lester till the last minute, lest she should interfere; while her stepmother offered to pack up her clothes, for fear that Agnes Hitchcocks might carry tales to that gentle lady, whose disapproval both dreaded. They would only stay a few days in London, Madame supposed; then, she hoped, they would re-

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turn. The way in which she said these last words was plausible enough, and somewhat comforted our poor little heroine; who, in spite of masterful resolutions, could not help a sore feeling in her heart—yet that evening the astounded Agnes received orders to take their remaining luggage the next day down to Cherrybank.

That very same evening, Richard Cust found it impossible to swallow his dinner with his usual calm; found it hard to hide the expectant excitement which filled all his mind, and drove him wild with restlessness, making him feel dry-throated as he eagerly, vengefully, counted the moments to the coming interview. The dining-room was far from the hall: no sound of a fly arriving at, or departing from, the door, reached him there. He was but midway through the courses of dishes when down at the railway station the last bell was ringing, and a train starting for London, with three

people in it whom it might have surprised him to see. He was thinking that moment, how the rows of people on either side would stare did they see his inner man! Little they knew the strange story, of which the climax was now agitating his soul and spirit to such a tempest; dark, sternly quiet, distinguished-looking beyond the rest as he sat among them.

He had hardly any settled idea in his mind, except that of getting all this mystery cleared up. That thought filled his brain; rang in his ears! He could not be cool enough to weigh the probable result of this or that explanation. Time enough for that when he knew all.

Soon it must be time! Surely now it was time! It was difficult to him even to breathe freely.

Despatching a waiter to ask if Mrs. Langton could see him, he waited—but the man returned, saying she was not in her sitting-room; was gone somewhere, he fancied.

The waiter was an idiot; a slow blundering creature. His own man, Delaney, had some wits; and he despatched that astute Irishman to make private inquiries as to Mrs. Langton's whereabouts. The valet went quickly; but stayed an interminable time; came back with still slower footsteps to tell his news—as well he might.

There was a tempest!—an outbreak of anger from his master!—which, had the dull walls had ears, it might have startled them to hear. Foiled, fooled, duped, the thunderstorm of resentment broke in execrations, if not loud, yet trebly, intensely deep; the blaze of lightning was no Summer sheets, but forked, fierce, and dangerous, scorching all those in its path. He rushed into action; he could not vent his wrath in aught else; questions, inquiries, demands were put imperiously to all those who could answer him. He saw Mrs. Lester, too; but she could tell him almost nothing. They had not fixed upon their hotel, and she

was too full of her own extreme surprise and annoyance to note the added strangeness of Colonel Cust's manner, for all he made strong efforts at restraint.

It seemed hours till the next train started; but when it did, a tall handsome man sprang alone into an empty carriage and was whirled away, gnawing in his heart revengeful thoughts; feeling as if on the war-trail—following up—tracking down a treacherous, ever eluding foe.

Half an hour or so later, after the servants' supper had been graced and enlivened by the presence of Mr. Lawrence Delaney, that fascinating individual was standing in a striking attitude near the end of a long passage, describing the late scene, with vivid illustrations, to Miss Hitchcocks and Mrs. Cust's Mamselle, who were seated on the ledge of a window in rapt attention.

"Excuse my omitting the strong language, ladies!—of that style perlutely termed 'nervous;'" here he waved one hand in



kind excuse of the Colonel's known unfortunate failings. "But were you ever through iron-works? Did you ever feel a scorching blast when the door of one of them rid-hot furnaces opened, and let drive a heat that would convert me into a pinch of snuff, and the likes of you two into adorable relics, in next to no time?"

That, he assured them, upon his honour as a gentleman, was the effect Richard Newland-Cust's passion had had upon him.

"Ah! the Colonel's getting past me control. He's beyant the beyants now intirely, and it's only some of your own sweet sex that can take him in hands at the present," finished Dick's henchman, with a deep theatrical sigh as he tried the effect of his patron's most effective side glance on Miss Hitchcocks: "Mamselle" being occupied in bewailing her lady's rheumatism, which had deprived her grand-nephew of her salutary influence—but Mr. Delaney dissented.

"Faith, the only chance there is left for

him is to marry an angel, and may he hold on by her wings when he wants to go to heaven ; *otherwise*——”

(The effect of the aposiopesis was as impressive as he could desire : both shook their heads, and Mamselle sighed, even tragically).

“But more power to him ! Sure, he’ll be good company *wherever he goes* !” was the final dictum of Cust’s still loyal supporter ; as, remembering other attractions steaming ready for him elsewhere, he wished his fair charmers a good night’s rest, departing with an air and a swagger which he flattered himself were even more irresistible than those of his model.

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not have borne to be guilty of, in his scrupulous chivalry towards her.

"Want you? Did I not write all, that blessed night? Why, how often do you wish to be told over again?"

Wat smiled outright; he would not much have minded having it repeated to him half a hundred times.

"And Mrs. Lester? Will she be pleased also at my coming back, do you think?"

"You may be certain of her," replied his friend, with emphasis. "She has been nursing that rheumatic old Mrs. Cust all day, taking a fresh worry on her shoulders, by way of getting rid of her trouble about Mabel. Verily I don't know how you will ever manage the others, or make your way down now to Cherrybank," she rather dismally added; "but I must say you look quite ready for any difficulties."

She had read very accurately in his face the determination which was written more deeply by far under the surface. Had

Mabel preferred it, he would have stayed away silently, as he had gone, making no sign; but if she wanted him, no matter for what service, no matter how little or how much, *then*——

Then, if he knew himself, nothing on this earth of obstacles or difficulties that could be overcome should stand in his way; nothing! His whole face, form, and bearing seemed to change as the man's mind rejoiced in this thought. If she wanted him—and she did want him—then the matter was settled, decided; there need be no further questioning; nothing could shake his purpose.

“What about Cust? Have you seen him lately?” he asked, avoiding a direct answer.

Seen Cust! Why, there was another extraordinary occurrence; and she proceeded to tell him how the Colonel had also gone off suddenly the very evening before, an hour or so after the Langtons.

“You don't think his starting off like

that could be in any way caused by their departure?" asked Walter, waking up to the possibility of a fresh complication, in a way which all his energies would be called upon to clear.

"Certainly not." Miss Higgins was ready to vouch decidedly for that. "He always thought her a dear wee soul; but nothing more in a serious way. In fact, it was *out of the question*!—but I must say no more. You understand, I am in his confidence."

"You seem to be in that of all of us, somehow or other."

And Juliana smiled broadly, for no compliment could have more flattered her. She seemed to herself a sort of hard-working benefactress, a benignant influence, and drew honest satisfaction from the contemplation of her own good offices. By-and-by all the others of the Higgins tribe, great and small, filled the room, and for a long time Walter could not make his escape. When he did so, the first person he stum-



bled upon outside, in the semi-darkness of the hall, was Colonel Cust.

"Why, they told me you had left. I am very glad, for my own sake, it is not true," he exclaimed warmly, after both had interchanged greetings.

Cust looked at him somewhat oddly: there was a tired, haggard air about his whole person, an unbrushed appearance of his clothes, as of a man who had just travelled far in hurried discomfort.

"Thanks, old fellow; I was obliged to go off suddenly—on business—but here I am again by train just now, as you see. Very glad you have turned up once more also. There is hardly a soul left here whom either of us cares to speak to—is there?"

His friend agreed there was not. Both were using evasion in their words, whilst aware of a common thought in their minds; yet both in some unexplained manner felt and reciprocated a friendliness lately gener-

ated in that mutual ground, but which neither expressed as yet.

"I must go and pay a visit to my poor old grand aunt, who is rather ill," observed Dick, after a pause. "For my part I hardly feel much desire to dine early at that big table. What do you say to joining me in a quiet little dinner together later? We'll have a talk afterwards in Mrs. Cust's room."

Huntley was nothing loth; so the matter was settled. Despite weariness, exhaustion after anger, and mental troubles none the less black because not absolutely defined in all their unpleasantness; despite disappointment on finding oneself suddenly alone—the little figure, fondly installed as mistress of the kingdom of one's mind and heart, seeming exiled beyond a dim misty plain, only beckoning faintly across the rough ground of stony difficulties lying between—despite all this—men may yet welcome their dinner! It is soothing to the flesh, if not absolutely satisfying to the spirit, to enjoy

the refinements of fragrant vintage, fair linen, fine crystal, and favourite dishes—which please the senses and restore the wasted tissues of body and brain—with one congenial, sympathising friend.

So both men might have owned, that night; when insensibly invigorated and gratified by more than the mere vulgar administration of food and drink, they installed themselves, after a cigar or two, before a glowing fire in Mrs. Cust's delightfully comfortable little room. Both lay back in their chairs, as if thoroughly to enjoy the quiet, lulled by the sybaritical influence upon them.

"Are you thinking of staying here any longer now?" said Dick, bluntly, breaking silence after a time.

"There is nothing to keep me," answered Wat, in as honest a confidential mood, begotten of their previous, though unexpressed new friendship.

"You know whereabouts their place is—

Cherrybank?" went on Dick, somewhat dreamily. (They had talked over the Langtons' flight in a guarded manner during dinner, which accounted for his taking for granted Huntley's unaffected comprehension of whom he meant.) "Are you at all likely to go down to that part of the world before long?"

"I don't see why I should not," said Wat, looking him straight in the face. "Are you?"

A peculiar expression passed into the other's dark, handsome face, and did not leave it at once. The question went home: it was the very thing he had been weighing in his mind.

"Listen here, Wat," he answered, looking as earnestly back at the other, "if I have to go down there also, it will be on a very different mission from yours! Yours—if you will allow me to guess it—ought to be a very pleasant one; and with all my heart I believe and hope you will have success."

It did one's heart good to see the pleasant, happy response on Wat's face as he thanked his friend briefly by a nod and a smile. They did not shake hands; but they meant as much.

"Do you know I thought your little run somewhere last night had something to say to all this," put in that shrewd, kindly Walter, after a stop.

"I tell you what it is, Huntley, I have half a mind to make a clean breast of the whole affair to you! You are such a good fellow, I know you could give me advice. I don't suppose—I don't believe—there is another man in England who feels in as strange a position as I do now!" burst out poor Cust, with an impulse he could not restrain.

He was not a man given to reticence about either his own thoughts or affairs; and many of his scrapes had arisen as much from his frank speech and too openly generous ways as from his quick temper. If he had

kept a silence as of the grave with regard to his marriage during fourteen years, so that none of his most intimate associates guessed it, it was perhaps from the cutting sense of the poor part he had played therein—of the pitying amusement the tale might cause. It so galled him, he endeavoured to blot, blur it out from his own very memory!

There was a something of the theatrical element in his composition, which made him ready enough to avow any piece of reckless daring or hot-blooded imprudence; not ill-pleased either to be seen in a more lurid light by scandal-loving, shocked circles, whose vaticinations as to his ruin scornfully amused him. Yet he bore this off so well by reason of his distinguished air and form, (like Saul's higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward) that he seemed by inborn right to claim heroic quality, and even his enemies hardly accused him of gasconading.

The difference between him and Huntley

was strongly marked in this; for Wat never was known to proffer lightly details of his own affairs, though few men were more applied to, to help and advise in the most private difficulties of others, or to rejoice in their good luck. Besides independence, there was also a certain sweet humble-mindedness about him, making him unwilling to believe that what merely regarded himself could have ever much importance for any save one or two tried, closest friends.

But to return from their characteristics to their present doings, he gave Cust some few words of hearty assurance of his interest and good fellowship; a few—but those so true and genial that Cust felt any lingering reserve melt at once in the warmth of gratefulness to such a friend in need. Impulsive as ever, he began at once a tale of his boyhood's follies; only vaguely hinting, however, at certain circumstances, which, as we know, related to Mrs. Lester.

## CHAPTER XIII.

“Da chi mi fido, mi guardi Iddio; da chi non mi fido mi guarderò io.”—*Italian Proverb.* •

“IT is about fourteen years since I was first in Paris, having been sent there by my grand-uncle, old Mr. Cust, partly in disgrace, on account of some wildness or other, but principally because my poor grand-aunt hoped distance would make the multitude of my sins seem less.

“They don’t call me a pattern of steadiness even now. I fear I have not improved,” and he raised his shoulders slightly, “but I believe, after all, the devil is not so black as he is painted. At least, we none of us like to think ourselves worse than others.



"Anyhow, in those days I believe I might have turned out better had things gone differently ; but I was honestly very much in love, and matters looked rather black ahead. I was thrown into the fastest set of gay young Frenchmen of my own age, and *seeing life* was fresher and more fascinating then than it has ever seemed since. When I look back over it, I own we were wild certainly—but, heaven knows! we might have been ten thousand times worse! No matter; the reports which were sent home about me were almost as bad as what *might* have been the reality!

"There were some greedy relations of poor old Cust's in Paris at the time. One horrible pair of mock-pious old women among them, who managed, in spite of their missions and meetings, to keep one eye fixed upon my misdeeds, and the other on my old grand-uncle's acres. Some of my follies got wind; and you may imagine the joyous cackle that ensued, and how they croaked

it all out at home—how I hate their tribe, from my very heart!

“Don’t mistake me either, Huntley! No one can think more highly than I do of *real* goodness. The most perfect woman I know is also the most religious: she is, if ever there was one, a dear woman! . . . Well, to go back to the subject, however, there may have been some excuse for them, as I had not a shadow of claim on the old gentleman—except in being his wife’s grand-nephew and adopted son, after a fashion. She was an heiress, too, and wanted me to come in for everything.

“Anyway, the upshot of the whole matter was that I received a letter, which—put an end for ever to all my wishes.” He bit his lip, rose, and moved uneasily to the fireplace, where he leant his back against the chimney-piece. “The old ladies did not succeed in disinheriting me, you see; but—I wish they had done that rather than what they did. I saw a marriage soon afterwards

in the *Times*—she was the only woman I have ever really cared for.

“Well! I need hardly tell you one does not grow more angelic after such events. I had never really gambled very heavily before; but I did so—heart and soul—then. I had been three or four months in the place already, and stayed on for one or two more, changing gradually from one set into another, each more devoted to play as a business.

“At last—at last I was taken to the house of an old French Marquis: De Warens, as they called him.”—Cust uttered a low curse at the recollection.—“I thought the *quartier* was rather a doubtful one, but they assured me he was poor; and the house was quiet and old-fashioned. Everything about it gave one a kind of impression of proud penury. All we had had before was child’s-play to what we had at his house; night after night we went there—a few only. Not more than four of us—but somehow he and I were nearly always antagonists.

"As to luck, it was varied ; sometimes terribly against me ; sometimes as much in my favour. He and I went about a good deal together also : there was a sort of poor *gentilhomme* air and an old-fashioned charm of manner about him which took my fancy—besides, I had dropped almost completely out of my old friends' society . . . . One day I went there unexpectedly, and came upon his daughters ; I had heard before that he had two, but, like all very young French girls, they were kept rigorously out of sight. This day some demon prompted me, I suppose, and I made myself agreeable to them—the dark one seemed sprightly enough and susceptible. But when the old Marquis came in, they disappeared at once. He excused himself to me, explaining that they had just come from some convent for girls of poor but noble families, and that, as he had few means of introducing them into society, they would probably be obliged to return to its shelter.

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“For a night or two after that he and I used to play *écarté* there alone together; and I lost heavily, but at last the climax came. One night, or rather grey morning, I flung down my last cards, and rose and faced him—a ruined man! Why—even now I hardly know—but I suspected foul play, and there were passionate words between us; for he lost his temper too, and I was maddened! Then I told him fairly I might go home and blow my brains out, as pay I could not! I hardly know all that passed—it is like an evil dream—but I believe he was convinced I did mean to destroy myself, and was afraid of the scandal. At least, he took another tone, and tried to soothe me—suggested this and that expedient—I laughed in his face! I had tried and done them all out already; all I *could* raise was not a hundredth part of his winnings; and to apply to my uncle meant being cast off at once and for ever.

“He grew thoughtful; quieted and then

persuaded me to go home, saying he wished to think over the matter as my friend, and see what could be done.

"I was not drunk; but I remember staggering out into the sleeping street and seeing stupidly a cold white dawn stealing over the grey housetops. To cut the whole thing short—he came next day; was friendly; sorry . . . beat about the bush . . . There were other ways, means, of settling these affairs between gentlemen. (The vile old arch-hypocrite!) In fine, would I marry his daughter—and agree, if ever it was in my power, to settle the disputed money upon her as a marriage portion? What do you think of that for an offer, Wat?" and Cust kicked savagely at a mass of coal with his foot.

"I would hear of no agreement—that was the only part of the matter I showed any sense in! And to my sorrow he gave way, and I was—in for it."

"And you did do it?" asked Huntley, with deep interest.

"I did ! . . . He settled the whole affair and took all trouble off my shoulders. It turned out my intended bride was always a Protestant at heart, too ! To facilitate matters, I verily believe she would have been made a Hindoo or Mahommedan. It was the fair girl (the other had been hurried into a convent); and I was glad enough of it, for she reminded one even less of . . . Well, I thought her ladylike and pretty enough, the day we were *fiancés*. He had taken her out to Meudon by the way, where she lived alone with her old *bonne* Marguerite ; to this day I don't understand why.

"I only saw her that once, you understand, before the day that we were married, quite privately. He told me it was the custom ; and when I hinted I had thought her then strangely silent, I was told my bride would be given me like a sheet of pure white paper, to write thereon what I pleased ! I did find her blank—as the blankest paper !

"The second time I saw her, was at our

marriage. Immediately afterwards my accursed old father-in-law took himself off . . . It's a strange story, Wat—but I was shocked by her crazed manner. She left the room, and I asked old Marguerite was there anything wrong.

“First she railed at me bitterly—seemed to consider our marriage a wickedness—then it all came out! Huntley, she was out of her mind! . . . . I understood then that she had been born an idiot; now I hardly know what to think. I took her over to Jersey, and established her there in a cottage with her old nurse, the only soul who could manage her. Whatever difficulties I was in, her allowance was punctually paid. What more could I do? Luckily her old father had been so anxious to keep the match a secret, lest my friends should interfere, that no one ever knew of it.”

“And the Marquis. What became of him?”

“Turned out to be—not exactly De Warens



—but Jacques Wolff, a forger of the first water! Had passed plenty of his counterfeit coin through my hands when it suited him to lose to me: had evidently imagined me more of a prize than I was—got some hints the police were getting on his track, and so was thankful to transfer the burden of this idiot girl to me. He was caught immediately afterwards; and even when I grind my teeth at his memory it gives me satisfaction to think of him as a *forçat*.”

“And you have kept it dark all these years? You are certainly right—it is a strange history,” slowly said Walter.

“But the strangest, wildest, most incomprehensible part is yet to come. Listen! . . . Huntley . . . I have seen her *here* . . . in her senses, as I believe—within the last two days. Have you seen—you *do* know—*Mrs. Langton?*”

Huntley looked at his friend with blank incredulity. In reality, the idea crossed his mind that the latter, in his turn, was crazed

—a monomaniac—or going to have a brain-fever.

Then the other burst forth in his tormented, utterly bewildered state with all we know—ending with an account of his rapid chase to London.

“It was a fool’s errand, of course. Nothing was known of them at the station, and I tried several hotels in vain. Then it struck me Mrs. Lester must hear from her sister, so I hurried back—never slept at all, and am dead beat.”

Wat was thoroughly aroused and alive to the complications of the whole case ; all his brains, energies, suggestiveness, were at his friend’s disposal. Closely and eagerly he tried to sift the evidence, to account for the possibility of what seemed to him the most improbable thing one who had *recovered* her senses should do.

“But did you never see her—never hear of her all this time?” was his natural query.

“I did go down once—it struck me as

my duty—about three years after. But it was so horribly painful ; she grew frightened on seeing me, covered her head, and cried—as it seemed to me—pitiably. She can't have been shamming then?"

"Of course not. And as to letters?"

"I was so sick of the whole thing that I only longed to banish it from memory ; so I desired old Marguerite never to write to me except when she acknowledged yearly the receipt of her money (it was bad enough to be reminded then)—unless anything remarkable happened, or that the other was seriously ill. She was very strong."

Again and again they talked it over, planned, consulted.

"You had better go down to Jersey," said Walter at last.

"But when—how soon? I shall know nothing of her movements either," answered poor Cust, whose head, never very cool, was now thoroughly bewildered from the excitement ever since the night before

last, and his consequent bodily exhaustion.

"You can wait here till we see whether Mrs. Lester hears from her sister by the second post to-morrow. If so, and we find out from her at what hotel they are—time enough to confront her on Sunday morning. You need not tire yourself out for Mrs. Langton's sake. If we don't hear, why, you can go straight to Jersey, and thence make your way to Cherrybank."

"Look here, Huntley—you won't desert me in this matter, will you? Could you not manage to come along with me, old fellow? I have good enough spirits, but a thing of this sort takes it out of one terribly, and I can't trust my temper either."

"I am ready, Cust, to go where and when you like."

"Thanks—thanks! You are so cool, and as steady as a rock. Besides, we row partly in the same boat, for you have business, too, at Cherrybank." And poor Cust tried a pallid smile; his disgusted heart-

sickness of the old memories and the new complications was telling upon him. "Only, I say, Walter," he went on after a pause, "you must ask Mrs. Lester for news to-morrow, as if on your own account; will you? . . . I can stand a good deal; but I could not stand telling her now a word about this."

Walter readily gave the required promise, as he would have given more for a friend in need—but when in private turned thoughtfully over in his own shrewd mind what this reluctance signified. Then giving it up for the present, he loyally resolved to help his friend to the utmost.

When the second post came next day, Mrs. Lester quietly, with all her sweet kindness of ways, showed Wat a note (hastily scrawled in pencil) from Mabel; saying they had slept at a certain hotel, and were to take lodgings on that morning. She might be too busied to write again, giving their fresh address, for a day or so. Mrs.

Lester was herself going to her own home immediately. Though saying nothing, her warmth of manner showed she wished him success in his own errand (which she believed he was alone bound upon). Walter, calculating therefore they would hear nothing more, made his plans with Cust in accordance.

Sunday morning, therefore, saw them in town, having agreed, should their inquiries at the hotel be unfruitful—as they proved—to proceed the next day to Jersey.

## CHAPTER XIV.

"There is no strange handwriting on the wall,  
Thro' all the midnight hum no threatening call.

. . . . .  
. . . All is safe. Thou fool,  
The avenging deities are shod with wool!"

W. A. BUTLER.

TOWARDS ten on the following Monday night, Mrs. Langton was standing in the dining-room of the lodgings she had taken in Sloane Street. It was a sombre enough room, with its horsehair-covered chairs and sofa, while there was a cold draught from an open French window, which swayed to and fro with an eerie sound as it brushed the curtains. A lingering cigar scent seemed to suggest that some-

one had been smoking outside in the little back-garden between high walls; of which garden nothing could be seen in the darkness except the shadowy outlines of some few poor shrubs.

Madame was standing holding a candle; talking low and earnestly to a man who was carelessly seated before her, as if riding his chair,—with both arms easily crossed on its back. A man with a look of strength in his head, which was peculiarly broad across the centre, somewhat rounded, and with ears very low placed. He had reddish-chestnut hair, and a rough-flowing moustache, with an imperial; long-slit eyes, which seemed to laugh from between their half-closed eyelids, as they kept a gaze of insolent, conscious power fixed on Mrs. Langton's eager and almost wolfish expression.

A handsome-looking man, one might perhaps at the first glance term this Frenchman—though his person and clothes were none of the cleanliest—but a second or third

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look at that broad head and those strong hands,—at a certain brutality of jovial ease (if it may be so expressed) in his face, had been known to cause an indefinable horror to some people of highly-strained nervous temperaments and ridiculous fancifulness.

“But the window is open, Auguste! You are so careless! Is there no one in the garden?”

“Yes, *ma chérie*. There are . . . two cats; whose music I disturbed. As to anyone else, I ask you, what do you take me for?”

“It is well. How did you get on with him? Did you *make* him consent? Will he then *at once* sign this will for me?”

“Be calm: do not excite yourself. He is asleep now; with pure fatigue, after wearing out even my patience tormenting him. He had the obstinacy of—of—almost myself!”

“*Ciel*, Auguste! How could you let him fall asleep? He might have given way, if

you had entirely exhausted him. You should have *shaken him!*"

And she brought down her long thin foot with quiet but vicious force upon the floor.

"Do it yourself, then," answered Auguste, with a sullen look in his half-closed eyes, and an unpleasant, if momentary, twitch of his lips at her taunts. "I am tired of hearing him moan to be left in peace. You can bear this slow creeping towards your end: I must gain victory at once! One shake of mine would send out all the sands of life still running in him; and I give it—when you like."

"But how can you be so daring—how can you?" (He smiled once more at her tone of unconscious admiration for qualities she could never so highly possess.) "No; no. That would spoil all; I must take it in hands myself, though I am worn out looking after the girl."

He laughed; a really entertained sarcastic laugh.

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"Is she not falling seriously ill rapidly enough; and is she to make a will too? Which departs this life soonest? our beloved brother, or young sister; eh? Confide to my friendly ears all your plans without fear. It would be only amusing to hear the deed devised which *could* terrify me."

"How can you talk so?" she cried with irritation, yet still keeping her gaze fixed upon him as if in forced homage. "It would ruin me if she did not get well. I might be even more pitifully provided for. I only wish to be her guardian until she comes of age, and I tell you I mean to treat her very well."

"Ah! *c'est ça*. How fortunate for the little step-daughter!" he said, with a careless grim sneer, which it was too much trouble to repress. "She will be a prize, then. Is she good-looking? You must not forget what you owe the cause of that party you belong to; she might suit one of us."

"One! Yourself, perhaps, for example!"

she retorted with a rising flush and a withering glance.

He gave his shoulders an easy shrug, and smiled broadly up in her face.

"Not so, my good cousin. I want ease, it is true ; but for that very reason it would be too wearisome moulding the ideas and views of a girl taken from among these English aristos. I am a son of the people ; and my companion must come from the same class, and go with me body and soul ! she must have tact, experience, ambition ! absolute devotion to me, and to the cause through me !—must be ready to cast to the winds all cowardice, and to carry into execution those plans of unequalled magnitude and grandeur which *I* have alone the genius, the head, the brains to devise !—but not the smaller talent to work out in detail. Plans of whose fruition *she* shall share the triumph—the glory !"

Her eyes seemed to light up suddenly and gleam back at his ; a little shiver of excited

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pleasure passed through her whole body. Despite the closeness of craft, despite habitual self-restraint, her whole mind had long lain open and bare as an unrolled map to his mercilessly analysing scrutiny. He had carefully estimated the heights of her exaltation,—calmly fathomed her possible depths for wickedness—pitilessly sounded the shallows of her womanhood!

Just now it pleased him to touch on that which it gratified her to believe she cherished as the one passionate devotion of her life; the one idea of æsthetic beauty which redeemed her from the reproach of all she felt at times to be mean and grovelling in her own self. Her “smouldering volcano!” as she loved silently to say to herself; nursing, hugging herself with the thought that under a calm exterior she nourished such flames as should serve to set alight other souls one day. He touched upon that secret passion—and the answer came in *fire*!

“Yes! yes! yes! *yes*!” she cried, moved

to a frenzy, while the intensity of emphasis took from her reiteration all it might have had of ludicrous ; even her usually impassive face working, while her fingers passed convulsively over it. "That indeed is life ! That is a destiny ! *Ah ! mon ami*, how our spirits soar in unison, mine and thine, . . . a future such as that ! . . . an ecstasy ! Judge then if I seek this miserable money for myself ! I—who long only to divide it among our community when the time comes : when no property shall be hoarded up, nor handed down : none, none tyrants, or nobles, (faugh !)—when all of us shall be equal, men and women, untrammelled ! unfettered ! —sharing all things ; all fellow-workers—only those superior and more rewarded, whose labours and intellects and zeal for the cause have been greatest."

There might have been the faintest curve of his lips as she unfolded and ended her socialist scheme ; but he answered with profound gravity,

"You speak justly—feelingly; and without doubt, when the time comes, it will be remembered how you have remained in slavery with this old man to gain that gold without which even the purity of our enterprise cannot aid it to assert itself. As to this girl, I wish you to look on her likewise as a tool to be used—gained if possible—if not, to at least aid us while her gilding is yet necessary to our ends. Such as I could not stoop to play the part of dependence on her which English laws and formalities might require; but there are others more tame—Raoul for instance."

She nodded; as if acquiescing vacantly in the didactic part of his speech, yet with her mind busied on something else.

There was a silence of a few minutes; then she spoke, turning away her head, as if preparing to go.

"You will come down with me to Cherry-bank; is it not so?"

"As you please," was the ready answer,

while he broke into an insolent smile behind her back. "In what capacity can I be of use to you? I have been engraver, writer, public speaker, editor, forçat, forger, and——"

"*Pst!*" she cried, stopping her ears. "No more. You come as yourself, as my cousin; and to aid me with him up there, so long as he stays ill."

"And afterwards——?"

"Afterwards! — afterwards! — we can speak of all that afterwards." And she left the room.



## CHAPTER XV.

“Ne’er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep,  
The river glideth at its own sweet will.  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep,  
And all that mighty heart is lying still.”

WORDSWORTH.

HOW stilly, deep, beautiful is the night  
—this night in a sleeping town!

Around, below all those thousand roofs  
lie a million strangely quieted human hearts  
and souls, beating with pulse-beats like to  
our own, kin to us in flesh and blood, though  
their histories of pain and happiness, glad  
life or sorrowful fate, we may never know  
—never see their faces in the busy, jostling

crowds of human life, of men and women,  
of our brothers and sisters !

“ Oh, the night brings sleep  
To the green woods deep,  
To the bird of the woods, its nest.”

But here, when its silence is laid upon the  
life-teeming, erst noisy city, silencing its  
noise, clank, and din—the roll and roar  
growing hushed and yet more hushed—is  
it not a still better gift ?

So thinks Mabel, who has left her bed,  
and wrapping herself up, crept noiselessly  
to the window, peering out, with her soft  
cheek resting on her hand—wearied of her  
sick couch ; still feeling giddy, weak, and  
trembling—but excited, enthralled, lifted  
up in her mind, she knows not why !

To her, opening her heart for the time be-  
ing to the love of mankind as higher than  
that of Nature, it does seem fairer : a bliss-  
ful, welcome darkness, giving rest to those un-  
known ones around. Rest to the happily-tired

little ones, whose angel faces nestle in rosy sleep in many a nursery crib under all those roofs ; rest to weary servants in those many attics ; to glad youthful hearts, beating in concert, sated with the day's pleasure ; to strong men's ambition ; to older, peaceful lives !

She fancies and fits to all of them graciously imagined histories. Sweet idylls to some ; touching stories of love and self-denial, and silent, unknown renunciation, but consequent reward, to others ; or again epics of great deeds done dumbly in everyday life, never to be told or sung—unpraised by the world—perhaps unconscious to the doer.

None of the thousand cries of sin, misery, blasphemy, crime—(there are words enough for the many forms taken by the one hateful whole ; dark Ahriman ! the principle of evil !)—none of these seemed to reach her ears to-night, though their sound

is continuous as the wash of the sea ; as the hum of insect life, too minute for our senses to catch. Well for her ! Is not the happy unthoughtfulness of youth's glad optimism but the sunshine needful to unfold the bud ?

After all this street is like other streets ; even less interesting by day. Yet as Mabel looked down at the dreamy darkness around, broken by patches of sharp white light on the pavement ; looked over the gardens of Cadogan Place, transformed by night into a larger space, mysterious, gloomy with the blackness of undistinguishable tree-branches, all its housetops beyond marked in quaint shapes, as it seemed, in dark relief against a faintly shimmering night sky ; here and there one, two red lights, as of watchers who wait and long for the morning, in the houses of those whose lives she cannot guess at—to her this town seemed quickening, strange, mysterious, because full of human life, and its sometimes sad, sometimes joyous, but always enthralling poetry.

And now—now such a moon as one sometimes dreams of, but only in September sees, slowly raised its globe of softened fire and white radiance over those far roofs and gables, softly flooding the sky with light; bringing out in stronger contrast houses, walls, darkness, before her—lights burning beyond! She could not turn away her eyes. At such times she seemed to steep her soul in the solemn beauty of the universe—to understand at last something of the whole cosmical glory which seems mysteriously to unveil, broaden, deepen, and brighten, to the earnest, patient watching gaze of its worshippers.

There was a faint noise—a murmur of voices in the room below, where her old father was lying. Stifled as it was, it yet aroused the young girl from her dream, and so slipping back to her couch, she lay quietly watching the moonlight sliding past white curtains to search out the darkness of her chamber. Once more she felt weak and

aching—the effects of her hurried journey, when absolutely forbidden such by the doctor after her accident. A fortunate illness, perhaps, for Mrs. Langton's plans; though Mabel was really grateful for the care, almost solicitude, shown her by her stepmother during its course ever since their arrival.

So, less restless now, because chilled and tired, she half dozes, half dreams in the silvered dark and growing warmth innocent, sleepy fancies. Wonders about Walter, where he is, and when she shall see him, with tender little dreamy prayers for his welfare—wonders what that murmur as of voices below can mean; too drowsy to be surprised.

Then came the sound of laughter and voices from some belated passers-by outside; a sudden rush past, as it seemed, of feet on the pavement; and she half started up into wakefulness, and then sank down again into

the soft lap of poppy-breathed sleep, wreathed with hop tendrils, whose tresses drop heavy with forgetfulness.

## CHAPTER XVI.

"Anger is like the waves of a troubled sea ; when it is corrected with a soft reply, as with a little strand, it retires, and leaves nothing behind but froth or shells—no permanent mischief."—JEREMY TAYLOR.

THREE days later an afternoon sun was shining broadly on September's stubble-fields and heavy hedgerows, down in the south-west of England. It lay warmly on the gravelled terrace and beautifully-kept velvet lawn in front of old Cherrybank, a middle-sized ancient house, hidden jealously from the near lane by a high wall and screen of trees. Seldom did neighbours pass the lodge and close iron gates in that wall, to come up the short sweep of the drive.



On the further side of the house there was a change in the view; a dip, irregularity, and beauty which surprised one on rounding the corner. From one's feet, the ground fell suddenly in steep terraces; then a low ivied wall—a rough descent into the dell of the Nye, which small streamlet curved itself, sliding happily past its rich little low meadow in the hollow, and lazily washing the feet of the woods, rising high and abrupt beyond; for, narrow as was its flow between blackberry brambles and tangling dog-roses and rushes, still these loved their Nye, and dipped into, and strove to cover it from the officious sunbeams, keeping its water babbling cool and dark past their roots. Just opposite the house it curved away to welcome the Whitewater that came slipping through the trees to join it, from its birthplace in the heart of the wooded hills which rose sheer opposite the house. Only on the right was a peep of the upland common lying above, where Mabel loved to climb; while be-

yond that, over the hill, lay the deer-park and neighbours' preserves, of which she had once told Walter. And all over steep autumn-tinged woods, stream below, and rich meadow by its banks, lay the hush of rest, and the warm peace of sunlight.

There was a peculiar silence round the house this day, as if stillness were needful to some one behind those drawn blinds. Even Mabel's old blind dog only whined very low as he stumbled against the pillars in trying to find the sunny corner beside the scraper he remembered.

A lower wing of the house ran out into the shrubbery on the right; its basement story given up to servants' offices; the upper rooms where Mabel lived. In the servants' hall, near this region, Agnes Hitchcocks and Bennet were holding a conversation, of which we may hear the end, though the beginning may have been too confidential.

It is a cool, pleasant room, cleanly and bright; the cloth laid for evening tea on the

large table, whereon the irrepressible Mimi is disporting herself, curving her back, springing—then descending on all-fours.

“Yes; he’s asleep, poor old gentleman, for he was lying quiet when I made up his fire just now. And, Miss Mabel—she’s sitting watching in the outer room, ready if he should call.”

“Poor dear! And she up nursing him all last night after her journey home. She’ll kill herself, Bennet.”

“Let be; there won’t be much longer to do it, Agnes;” and both nodded their heads with awe and some sorrow.

Though Miles had never been a kindly master, one misses any accustomed face, pities anyone going from our midst—who knows how far and whither?

“Where is Madame?”

“Lying full length on the drawing-room sofa, resting of herself—as usual.”

“And where’s *him*? Where is that Moss-

hyur?" went on Bennet, in a broad tone of vulgar hatred.

"Monsure!"—(there existed a dispute as to pronounciation between these two).

"Where *he* is—the dear knows!"

Just then that individual lounged slowly past their view, smoking, and looking all round with easy enjoyment—his hair now close cropped, his clothes better by far than when we saw him in London.

"Hoff to the vineries to devour grapes—of course!" bitterly pronounced Bennet.

"And asking for vi'lets in his room forsooth!" chimed in Miss Hitchcocks. "I'd *vi'let* him!"

Just about that time there was a sound of wheels in the lane, and a fly stopped at the gate. Some altercation ensued between the driver and lodge-keeper, since old Eunice, the latter, would not permit him to drive through. The delay seemed to anger one of the two occupants of the carriage, a dark handsome man, who at once suspected

the old woman of being told to refuse him admittance, and indignantly declared his intention of getting in—no matter who tried to prevent him.

“Take it quietly, Cust,” put in his companion, who was of course Wat Huntley. “After all the old lady says her master is ill, so they don’t want any noise of wheels. If he is not too bad, we can walk up, perhaps.”

Somehow everyone listened, and felt an access of reasonableness whenever Huntley intervened in any matter. It was not merely from the instinct that kindness and sweet temper alone prompted him to step between, when he *was* wanted; but also from the utter absence in his tone of faintest reproach: no one suspected him of a tinge of Pharisaism.

On this occasion he had his way. The old woman let them through with readiness, remarking that she believed Mr. Langton was rather better to-day, which, to her

mind, was the more reason for trying to keep him so.

Both friends discussed the situation rapidly, as they stood a moment inside. Instead of flying from vengeance, a wanderer on the earth's face, the sought foe was—quietly at home! Cust, remembering the injustice of his outbreak of a few moments past, suggested very dubiously that it was just possible Madame had only gone to London on account of the old man's health—but Walter, who had seldom found people's actions deviate with remarkable suddenness from the line dictated by their characters, did not believe it—and Cust was not loth to acquiesce with a peculiar keen, almost joyous vengefulness.

But this expression passed somewhat away, as they went up the short drive; for the spell of peaceful calm around—in which the very sunlight in its mellowness seemed to contain a silence—fell upon them. And later, while he rang and stood waiting

in the small, dark stone porch, one could not help seeing the change for the better the intervening time had wrought in him. He looked a man off whose shoulders a burden had just been rolled ; still showing traces of its weight—but freed and upright.

Bennet opened the door. Mrs. Langton was in, he believed ; but Miss Langton was with her father, who must on no account be disturbed. In a lowered voice Wat quickly then told Cust he would not enter ; he should wait outside on that bench in the sunshine.

Madame had been dreamily reclining on a sofa at the further end of the drawing-room. Through the bow-window she could see with half-closed eyes the woods rising close opposite, beyond the dell—so close, it seemed but a mere stone's throw across—and watching the light on their tinted foliage, already warmly browning, here and there yellowing through the green, the rich

leafy expanse stretching up in beauty to hide out the sky-line from her as she lay, the ex-governess—the Bohemian—felt a pleasant, lulling foretaste of possession. After all this English life of sleepy comfort, of ease and certitude that the morrow would bring no alarm or flight, no loss of newly-gained riches—these rich-grained fields and thick woods—had all a certain charm, and would be good to fall back upon in the future, when they should be her very own, and——!

The door opened. Who!—who was this entering? Richard Cust! She sprang up with a little cry of mingled fear and hatred, trembling, as she drew as far away from him as possible. When last they parted, one secret of which she held the key gave her a certain feeling of equality with him; but—but—he had FOUND IT OUT! She knew it; felt so at once with some craven instinct, which interpreted rightly his springy step as he strode forward, his proud head and eager, erect bearing. He knew it; and



armed with this fresh weapon, had come to wrest away all she had striven for—ease, this house, riches, possession—all ! when a few more hours would have decided in her favour—old Mr. Langton DEAD—and the will safe in her possession.

Frightened out of self-restraint, her one source of strength vanished. Fear, which with power would have made her cruel, now in her weak anger made her rave in speech with a torrent of abusive, broken-voiced hatred, while she quivered with passion as he stopped, facing her.

“ Why—why had he dared follow her—to persecute, hunt her down ? It was cruel, wicked ! . . . *infâme* ! . . . the depths of malignity ! Had she thrust herself upon him, knowing he disliked her ? Never ! She called the high gods to witness. Who, with a soul above baseness—who bearing even the name of gentleman—would so oppress a weak, defenceless woman, who had at last found shelter ? ”

Yet there was method even in her madness of rage. Long habit made her say the best for herself even in that fell surprise; caution of second nature kept her invectives free from offensiveness; from coarser railings, which birth and breeding had not made unknown—even had not the look in Cust's face quelled her.

Two minutes her outburst might have lasted, then he authoritatively stopped her.

"Madame!—*silence*!—that is enough! Recriminations are childish, or I would tell you in my turn how all these months *you—you* have cheated me!—how you escaped, and hid in London to prevent my finding out what I should have discovered if you had dared meet me again. Do you know where I have been since?"—he bent forward, bringing all the passionate force, the concentrated anger of just scorn and retribution in his dark face and glowing eyes to bear upon her. She quailed

and shrank still closer to the wall from him.

"I have been in Jersey!"

She was growing greyer; more ashy.

"Do you know what I saw there? *My wife's grave!*"

Silence; no sound.

This was the moment of vengeance, of triumph, which in the last hours he had thirsted for as so sweet; the blasting exposition of her duplicity for nigh two years; her cowering prostration under the calm but terrible announcement that her disguises had been torn aside—all known, bare and plain to his righteous wrath.

Would she never answer—not speak, and so spoil, by want of confession, the fulness of his cup of victory?

She did speak. Low—stammering—white-lipped as it was, her answer was very different from what his sternly revengeful ears prepared with vindictive joy to hear.

"*Mais oui* . . . of a certainty . . . Yes; yes

—what else could you see? . . . *Pauvre Adèle* . . . sister! Ah! why have you frightened me so terribly? Did you not know it all—long, long ago?”

Her figure shook, swayed, and with a beseeching cry she fell helplessly forward on the sofa upon her face like a dead thing.

How long it seemed before he could bring her to herself after that fainting-fit! Eight, ten minutes perhaps had passed, by that rare clock on the chimney-piece; but had one asked him later, he would have said it was a full half-hour. He would not ring yet, for fear of exciting gossip which might be avoided in that quiet household; but he threw up two of the low window-sashes, pulled some flowers out of a vase, and sprinkled her face and hands with water. For some moments he did ask himself whether it might not be a pretence,—but her limpness and unconsciousness were too evident. He always said he *could* not have been deceived! There have been cases,

however, of far greater simulations, and other folk afterwards believed that, if her body was apparently dead, yet her mind, at least, was hardly in a swoon. At last her eyelids flickered—there was something like a far-off moan—then gaspings—quicker sobbings for breath. After a long time she came to herself—only to break wailingly into a storm of low weeping, the end of the hysteria; trying, though with weakness, to crawl away; to crouch in a heap as if for dread of him.

Somehow Cust's triumph did not seem at all sweet now. He had never thought of such an ending as this. Of course he knew he had been in the right—yet still he was by no means certain of how far she had actually done him a wrong by concealing her sister's death. Impulsive always, he began to feel a shame for having seemed to trample on that broken-spirited creature shivering and weeping on the floor.

"Listen, Azelie," he said, clearing his

throat, and speaking slow and distinctly as he stood over her. "I have been harsh to you just now; but you must own I had strong reasons. You must have known at the hotel that I had never heard of Adèle's death—that I—I—could not tell who you were . . . yet you never explained. Then, when I went to Jersey, and found poor old Marguerite bed-ridden in the cottage, she told me all! How your sister died over a year and a half ago, you having come to live with her some time before; how the old woman herself, though ill from nursing and watching, yet wrote to tell me, and wrote *again* when her yearly allowance came in, as usual, a month or so later——"

He paused; the inference of his words was emphatically signified, if not spoken outright. The suspicion that she had caused those letters to miscarry for sake of the income that both knew she had mostly taken from the old nurse and enjoyed, was plain.

"What is that to me?" she slowly an-

swered, in quavering tones. "Where were you? . . . . Did you not get them? . . . . Were you in England?"

That question staggered him. Like a flash he *did* remember—did recall—that he had been just then in Vienna; and (the woman must have been a sorceress) that he had told the porter of his club to burn all letters that looked like bills!

Slowly, but frankly, he admitted as much. But still, why had she gone out as a governess, yet used that money, without a word to him!—one word which, as she must now see, by clearing everything, would have been of intense importance to his life? She sat up, white, dishevelled, yet with a certain pathos as she faced him, almost whispering in her weakness and emotion.

"Why I did it? Because I had no clothes, no money, no *boots even* to go with to Mr. Langton's, except as a beggar in rags! You made no sign; and *she* would never have denied me that paltry sum. Did we

not share our crusts together as little, little children?"

She ended as if exhausted, and Dick now almost felt himself a brute to have grudged her the mere money, while she had taken no part in keeping that burden on him for so many weary months longer.

He remembered, too, that in the acknowledgment he *had* received six months ago from old Marguerite, he ought to have remarked that it contained only thanks for his great bounty—without one allusion to his dead wife. How was he to know that the devil (not this time in the form of a serpent) had so prompted that aged *bonne*; while she had done the bidding given her through another with the docility of habit.

"At least, it seems strange that you so evaded me at Harrogate—that you escaped to London as if in deadly terror," he at last said, compressing his lips a little; not yet willing to abandon the field.

"A-h! Was it, then, any wonder? . . .



I did fear you—did elude you! I said to myself, 'He was deceived by our father! He must hate my very name! He will tell my poor old husband that I am a forger's daughter, and I shall be turned from his roof'—this happy, happy roof, where alone I have had peace and shelter—I shall be again an outcast! Do *you* know what it is to be hungry? . . . I do! Ay, to gnaw my very fingers!—Do you know what it is to be a *beggar*, lonely, desolate; with worse than no father, and without *sister*!—without *brother* to help you? . . . I do! I do!"

Richard Cust's hasty judgment was at once and entirely convinced—his hot, generous soul moved with pity, and self-indignation at his own base suspicions; at the unreasoning terrors, the fright he had given this weak woman, whose profession of former attachment now suddenly recurred again, puzzling him as it had done before.

"Tell me," he gently asked. "Did I ever see you except once?"

She flushed ; hesitated.

“You never knew—it is a painful story, but——”

Then there was a noise—a call for help. Mabel threw open the door.

“Madame! Madame! He got out of bed before I heard—and then I found him so ill—so strange! And, Captain Huntley—but quick ; he may die !”

## CHAPTER XVII.

"There comes a night when all too late  
The mind shall long to prompt the achieving  
hand,  
The eager thought behind closed portals stand,  
And the last wishes to the mute lips press  
Buried ere death in silent helplessness."

GEORGE ELIOT.

**B**OTH on the journey down, and since then, Mabel noticed with an aching heart how changed her old father had become in those few days whilst she had lain ill. He lay back quietly for the most part, with his eyes closed; or if he did open them, it was with a look of weak, wandering, childish terror; if he did speak, it was

in an almost unintelligible mumble, mandered over and over again. Yet through the dulness of failing senses, and the torpor of ebbing vitality, some faint pleasure seemed to stir in his dimmed soul when she ministered to his wants: a more peaceful look came to that drawn, wrinkled, changed face whilst he seemed to feel her beside him.

And Madame allowed her presence!

The fact would have been stranger, but that Mrs. Langton counted on his disinclination, if not utter inability either to speak or stir; and was anxious (if it were safe) to lay some more slight claims on her step-daughter's gratitude.

Mabel was thinking sorrowfully, yet with some balm to her soreness of heart, of these strange, faint signs of affection shown to her "at the last—at the last!" She will not leave him, she tells herself—while wondering at a numbness to pain which seemed to enwrap her, dulling those emotions which

*ought* to be more keenly alive to the prospect of her grief—will never leave him now, during what short time remains.

The girl is so changed herself already, one would hardly recognize her for the mere child she seemed a few weeks ago, when she left her old home. The often mischievous, sometimes sullen expression of a once wildly free, but later captive, half-tamed sprite had passed away. And though the old frank innocence, the wild-scented sweetness, which had so little of garden-culture but was as grateful as moorland heather—all of good that neglect or unkindness had never cankered or changed—still remained, they seemed embodied in an older, fairer, more wideblown flower. The child had become a maiden, and sorrow would soon make her a woman. So the rosy bud expands to the white blossom, itself to be withered before the red fruit comes to maturity.

She was sitting in an outer room, the open

windows on the ground-floor of which gave her a view down the green terraces and rose-beds, and across the little bosky dell, here losing itself in the trees. The door was carefully ajar between her and her old father's warmed, darkened bedroom, and she could hear the sleeper's stertorous and painful breathing. It seemed to stop—her quick ear caught a sound of awakening; and as she went and stood in the doorway he saw her framed in the light beyond his darkened chamber.

“Mabel !”

Low and cautious as was the call, yet its sound was unmistakably clear. With a quick upspringing of hope and gladness, she joyfully answered, and stood the next moment beside him.

“Are they there? Is it—is it safe?”

For the first time she realized the abject fear in which Madame and Auguste Blanc kept him in thrall, by the look with which his shaking head, as if palsied, turned all

round to search feebly every darkened corner, by the witless groping of his poor wasted fingers. Suppressing her own painful surprise, she re-assured and soothed him; told him where those two were, and how the doors between were shut; wondering what this strength might be which enabled him to speak with such distinctness.

"Open the shutters . . . a little. Let me see you."

Trembling she did so; and coming back, took with new courage his chilled, withered hands in her own warm, young ones, while he scanned her face with curious eyes, as if seeing her from far away.

"I am glad you stay near me . . . you guard me. It pleases—soothes! Keep them away . . . Don't leave."

"I promise to stay near you—to be always close beside you," she cried, her voice shaking with a yearning affection which she feared to alarm him by showing, since so little such dread, lay in his pitiful appeal,

tinged with the grateful selfishness of childhood. Surely this other fear could be only one of the amorphous horrors or megrims of a sick mind as well as ailing body ; since no one could have hurt him !

He drew away one hand to find a key which hung, concealed, round his neck ; then pressing it into her hand, pointed tremblingly to the small case of drawers containing his precious stones, which had been replaced beside him.

“That, at least, will be yours, remember ! She thinks—he ! he !” (The chuckle, as if at baffling some enemy’s wiliness, sounded so sadly childish.) “*She* thinks it only contains rubbish . . . and in that drawer there—see ! you may search. But let no one else look—no one—except your cousin, Parson Langton . . . He is honest—at least.”

“Yes, dear, yes ; but oh ! father, would you not like to see the clergyman here—just for this once—for once ?”



He turned a surprised, mournful smile full upon her at that aching cry.

"Like a woman! . . . a very woman! Child, what have we in common? He never understood me. Long since I recognised his utter inability to give me comfort—help . . . even culture and mind were wanting. Rather let me face alone the great darkness, in hope and trust of that Goodness science has taught me gladly to acknowledge." He paused a few seconds, as if gathering up strength and collecting ideas; then went on, in a more tremulous voice—"Mabel, in case I did get worse in a day or two—*in case*——"

"Yes," she replied, looking up at him with a quivering face.

"You would be an heiress, and all—all!—my house, fortune! far worse, my writings and collections, which the ignorant cannot prize, will perhaps be lost; scattered abroad to the vulgar at public auctions by your husband—by some coarse utilitarian,

maybe, without love of art ; unscientific ; a fortune-hunter !”

She flushed hot, with an indignant denial on her lips, but he persisted.

“You are young and trustful ; and women, though beguiling, are beguiled . . . Promise me to wait a year and a half, no matter whom you elect to marry. That is a test—poor, yet a test . . . Promise it me, my little girl—to set my fears at rest.”

“I do promise, since you wish it,” was her frightened answer ; and he looked happier.

“There is my great treatise . . . five times I have undone the labour of years to attain perfection. I may yet end it—who knows ? . . . Now, child, quickly ! Go into Mrs. Langton’s room there.”—(He lowered his voice to a terrified whisper.)—“Down in the lowest drawer of that press is a parcel—I watched her hide it—reflected in the long glass—quick, quick ! fetch it !—So !” with a long gasp of relief, as she

brought him what seemed like a roll, in many paper wrappings. "Poke up the fire now, little one, and leave me. Close the door; I must sleep—yes, sleep."

Mabel was trembling as she sat down in the next room on leaving him; feverish, though the soft breeze stole in under the awning outside the window, trying caressingly to soothe her. His very strength to exact this strange promise was in itself terrifying; compared with his previous torpor, it seemed as if he had for those moments arisen from the dead—his voice like the living speaking from out the grave.

Somehow, though she had not dared hope before, a more leaden weight seemed to press now on her heart and brain. As in a nightmare she sat, her hands pressed together. What was that shuffling sound which, though slight, aroused her delicate hearing, strung as it was by nervousness. A rattle of fire-irons!—a groan!"

She sprang to the door with one bound;

threw it open—then screamed for help, as she caught sight of her father, fallen against the fireplace; his face upturned to her, as if asking succour, but changed, distorted with pain!—a living, yet, alas! stricken and helpless human heap.

Ears outside caught that shrill cry for aid. Footsteps sounded as some one sprang through the open window of the next room—then hurried in—and other arms beside her own helped to raise the dying man's heavy form.

“Give him to me, Mabel—altogether. Call the others, dear, and send for the doctor; quick.”

“You! you here—Captain Huntley!”

As if not believing her senses, she stood one second rooted to the ground; then rushed from the room.

When the others hurriedly entered, it was Cust who reverently helped Walter to lift and lay the dying man in his bed. Madame stood by, but her quick eyes caught

sight of something lying under the grate they had never seen; something of parchment which looked suspiciously like a deed! Quick as thought, while their backs were turned, she had pulled it out, safe—with the slightest brown of singeing—and passing into her own room with it hidden in her dress, thrust it into some receptacle.

Then Mabel had come back. All stood round the dying man very still, while he lay silent, though by his eyes they could see he was not insensible. At last Mrs. Langton made a nervous movement, and his gaze fell on her; then it beseechingly sought Mabel's eyes, who, in her turn, looked with an imploring face at the two men. In a low voice Wat, who was beside her, asked the reason; and awestruck she whispered back, her pale lips trembling, that he wished his wife away. She had hardly spoken before Madame glided out into the next room, where, with a frightened, white face, she listened behind the door. A more quiet expression came

at once over the old man's face ; stayed and grew into happy peacefulness—but all knew, though not a word, hardly a mute sign was exchanged, that he could not last long. Mabel, white with suppressed anguish, pressed her lips passionately to his hand—slipped her hand into his ; his fingers closed upon it. Into the girl's mind came a strange flash of exultation even in the solemn hush of the moment. It was the first—the only caress she had ever dared give him ! Now, now he must know what love she had had dumbly for him all these years ; he could repel her no longer ; must suffer her kisses on his hand, and at last—a little—he had just shown some affection for her.

The pain of his fall had passed, but he lay in a gentle stupor, only his lips at times moving ; murmuring gently to himself of things scientific, between which they could not guess the connection, as perhaps none there was in that once so finely, exquisitely organized intellect ; so sensitive, balanced

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

"Oh! bury me not in the full churchyard, where rank  
     weeds reeking grow,  
 And the poisonous earth, with its thrice-filled graves, lies  
     festered below;  
 Where the grave ne'er wakes a thought of death from the  
     careless passers-by,  
 And the sexton only speaks of it as a busy trade to ply;  
     \*      \*      \*      \*      \*      \*      \*  
 "But lay me in a quiet spot, with the green turf o'er my  
     head,  
 Far from the city's busy hum, the worldling's heavy  
     tread;  
 Where the free winds blow and the branches wave and the  
     song-birds sweetly sing,  
 Till every mourner *there* exclaims, 'O Death, where is thy  
     sting?' "

CARPENTER.

**T**HAT evening the two men friends, who  
     had gone back to the market-town,  
 stayed at the old-fashioned but comfortable



inn of the "Lamb and Flag." By ten o'clock most of the lights were out, for the folk there were early, and the little street below was pleasantly dark and quiet. They, however, still sat talking in the best parlour, in whose dark, polished furniture their candles were reflected; while from the white curtains came faint suggestions of these having been stored with sweet grey lavender in homely presses.

"Well, I had best go to my brother's to-morrow," said Wat at last. "I'll come back for the funeral, though. Even if she does not like me much, old fellow, yet I think it would please her; and I should be glad to think I had done *that*, in any case."

So like dear old Wat! thought Cust; and he looked at his friend with a silent but hearty wish that he might gain his heart's desire.

He himself could not but remain, for on going to tell Madame that all was over, she had so feebly implored him not to leave her alone in her trouble, that, in one of his

generous impulses, he had promised to stay; and to-night a note had followed, pathetically asking him again for help, in the sad details that bewildered her, a poor foreigner; for the sake of—the past!

After all, he told himself, he was her brother-in-law; and—he had been harsh towards her.

Then they fell to thinking together over Walter's difficulties, for his reserve was only that of a sweet nature unwilling to trouble others (excepting those friends who *would* be so troubled) with his cares. What might the will contain?—in whose power would poor little Mabel be left? As matters now stood, Wat had to sail for India in barely four weeks; what had best be done, if—all came right? Come back for her soon?—take her out with him? (The last was a wild flight of imagination, at the improbability of the actual accomplishment whereof he himself smiled a little.)

But Cust was buoyant with hopefulness,

so that the spirits of both revived slightly under his words, somewhat exhausted as each had felt after the excitement of the previous days ; awed and sobered, too, by the scene they had so lately witnessed. If Madame were the guardian, she dared not refuse Dick's plea for his friend. He, Cust, could publish who she was, and no doubt, like all women, she wished to stand well with society; while if it were Mrs. Lester——

“She will come this week, of course.”

Poor Dick started.

“Will she? I give you my word I never thought of that,” he answered, quite nervously, for he had bared the last sanctuary of his heart to Walter's kindly counsel and sympathy.

“I know that. But perhaps you will ask her what she thinks it right for me to do under the circumstances. I believe she is my friend ; but whether or not—her sister is so young, that—it seems more honest.”

So next afternoon found Huntley gone

northwards; while for the few following days Cust (after rising late, as was his custom) would walk over and stay all afternoon at Cherrybank. Any awkwardness he anticipated vanished before that Frenchwoman's wonderful tact. As a sorrowing sister-in-law she came down to meet him; listened with bewilderment but gentle assent to all he proposed, leant on his advice like a helpless creature; and was so lowlily, humbly grateful that he, who had seldom been very proof against wiles of women—though never enslaved beyond a certain point—felt himself quite touched and subdued. He forgot a great deal—her pretended Swiss nationality, for instance: excused to himself her adoption of the name of Wellnar, since, as she sorrowfully hinted, her father's forgery had degraded that of Wolff.

As to Monsieur Blanc, he was gone—vanished; and his place there knew him no more. When Cust, who had caught a glimpse of him upon that day of the death,

began to ask questions, Madame's gentle and candid answers not only disarmed, but even interested him in that personage.

In the twilight, when everything was very still as they looked from the drawing-room windows over the dell, she told him a great deal. How, when her father had been sent beyond seas as a forger, her cousin Auguste, and Raoul his brother, had been as her brothers; the old mother, for whose support they toiled with filial devotion, as her mother. But, of course, she had not long remained dependent upon them; and she hinted of the weary life of an under-teacher in a *pensionnat*, where hard fare was mingled with the insults and caprices of school-girls, the harshness of superiors; worse even, when that support at last failed, and sewing shirts in a garret brought hardly enough to keep body and soul together.

She said it so simply that it affected Richard Cust far more than would have any amount of self-pity. And because parts of

her story bore here and there internal evidence of truth, he believed the whole.

Auguste, she said further, had come to see her in London ; and she had persuaded him down for those few days, partly for country air to recruit his health, partly because she had feared moving her poor husband without a man's assistance. Of course he had returned to his arduous work in London ; and she vaguely alluded to correspondence for newspapers, and such-like employment. He was a truly good man ; high-souled, peaceful and pious ! (She might also have added he was a self-made man—and adored his maker !)

For two days after her father's death, Mabel hardly spoke. She lay still in her darkened room, with her face turned to the wall. The girl's body and spirit seemed utterly prostrated, for not only had previous excitement, and then the exhaustion of sitting up with her father brought on a return of her illness ; but the mind, shaken and troubled

too early by her love for Walter, was all the more unprepared for this terrible shock—her first sight of death-land, whose doors gape around us. More too; for a few hours after her dead father breathed his last, Madame came suddenly upon her in the night, and then and there dropping theatrically upon her knees, implored forgiveness for the past, promising amends in future, if only Mabel would love and stay with her! Taken aback, poor little, generous Mab had forgiven—said she knew not what—and lain awake trembling (unused to such scenes) till cockcrow.

She did not think now: she only felt an awful sense of isolation. Her nature had been so warmly loving towards the few of her own domestic circle (though proud and shy with the world). Now the one support to which the tendrils of her love could stretch themselves out, even though unheeded, was taken from her—the hoary-headed philosopher gathered to his fathers,

he for whom, during solitary years, the child of his old age had been prophesying fame (feeling so proud even of its ideal accomplishment); venerating, looking up to him, though herself disregarded.

Agnes Hitchcocks alone came in to see after her, and that kindly but silently; the more seldom the better, to unhappy Mabel's mind. She was like a wounded wild creature; only longing to creep from the light, to hide away in solitude.

That part of the house had always been specially her own; consisting of a small two-storied wing, hidden in front by the shrubbery, but at the back looking into the dell of the Nye, which curved closely round this angle of the house. Above, there were only a heavy swing-door, a little passage fronting her two rooms, and a small staircase leading down to the exactly corresponding story below, lived in by Agnes Hitchcocks alone; and here was also a private door leading outside at once towards the



dell—an outlet always used by Mab in the old times.

Two days she staid in her bedroom; the third afternoon she rose and dragged herself into the other room. She sat there long; looking out of its two windows up at the woods in front, down at the streamlet below, just passing from between its rough, steep banks into the little green meadow in the hollow. It was a bare enough room, but containing associations of almost every day she could remember; from the little chair and doll-house of babyhood, to the dumb-bells, telling of later times and her bodily, if not mental, development. The inked table across which she and her old master had so often haggled and argued. The piles of strange dusty books, full of dried flowers, stacked in odd corners; collections of minerals; the basket in which her old dog dozed out life—such was its furnishing.

There, Madame glided in and began talking to her. Soon the girl put her hands

to her ears, and in a broken voice begged only to be left alone. All the somewhat unmeaning (and to some minds horribly grotesque) details connected by grim tradition with our mourning, revolted her, she cried. And Madame, sighing and fawning, agreed with her, bitterly sneering under her breath against custom as the law of fools, and only wishing she and Mabel were living where they dared act, as was simple and beautiful in their own eyes—not in slavish subjection to the dictates of a false, hollow society. To which wretched Mabel, half maddened by all her stepmother had insisted she must hear and decide on as a duty—the prices and amount of crape, gloves, scarves, and all the rest of it—though in truth these were intentional cruelties of that lady's own—passionately cried that she agreed; and so was left in peace.

But next day, when her stepmother came again, she had fled. In the evening she told Agnes that she had spent the day in

the woods, as the only place where seclusion was possible ; and the latter, who had been fretting—soft-hearted soul—lest the Autumn cold might do her former nursling harm, warmed and comforted her.

The funeral was to be on the next Tuesday : and on Friday Cust took heart of grace to speak of Mabel's future and Huntley's hopes to the sister-in-law, whose reception of the subject—though he had grown to like and pity her—he somewhat oddly dreaded.

She was breathless with astonishment, righteous in her indignation ! It was indecent to have broached such a subject while her poor beloved husband's remains lay there hardly cold—still unburied. It was the villainous design of a fortune-hunter upon a girl of sixteen !

At that, Cust, whose hot anger was the more easily aroused that he had been steeling himself against something similar, lost self-control. His indignation even frightened her ; all the powerful reasons for her com-

pliance he had spoken of to Walter coming unawares to his lips, till finally in bitterness he told her to remember the difference between those of her former position and the Huntleys of Huntley Hall ; to ask herself also whether the guardianship she seemed to claim might not reasonably be disputed by the girl's relations as unfitting.

She turned white for a moment. *Did he know!*—the one thing she had still hoped was secret. How she too had been implicated in her father's forgery, having only escaped by not taking even time to warn him ; that still, were her change of name known, she might be sought and imprisoned by the laws of extradition ! (Cust verily never guessed at such a thing ; if, indeed, he half fancied she might have aided her father, it was as a weak tool of that polished, courteous old villain ; not as an accomplice.)

The instant after he had spoken, however, she had extended both hands deprecatingly, with a fallen pride in her resignation that, if

over dramatic, was yet somewhat touching.

Perhaps she had been wrong, and she prayed him to forget the hot, hasty answer dictated by a foreigner's impulsive nature. As to the guardianship, she calmly added, she did expect it. Her old husband had told her that, having chosen her as his wife, he put all trust in her—as was natural. Nay more, had declared his intention of leaving her all he possessed, though that she had begged, implored of him not to do ; and should he be found to have put his declaration into effect, she called Cust to witness that she would never be unjust enough to accept the orphan's portion.

“He had no love ever for Mabel,” she added, with a sigh, “but to me, as his sick-nurse, he was so grateful.” And she spoke of weary watchings and constant care through many a murk night to chilly dawn, till her companion, who knew little of similar experiences, felt inclined to own such labour was, after all, worthy its hire.

True, she and Mabel had not been very good friends for a time, but that she explained as only natural; excusing the girl's feelings no less than her own soreness at the former's rebellion. Dear Mab had already begun to love her again, as in the old pupil and governess days—the very night of her father's death had come and promised never to forsake her stepmother!

She stopped short with a low moan, pressing her hand to her side. Alarmed by the painful silence she kept to his solicitous queries, Cust sprang towards the bell, when she stopped him.

“Better now, my friend,” she said, with a strange smile of pathos. “It was a nothing—or rather something I have some time known. The relations you spoke of may not long envy me guardianship or home. I have hopeless heart disease!”

The announcement, from a woman to whom he had just spoken in anger, shocked Cust; he thought of her sickly, pale com-

plexion ; recalled the strange fainting-fit he had caused, and became at once gentle and pitiful.

Then she resumed the subject of Huntley, asking him to consider it a little from her point of view ; to remember Mabel's age, want of both education and experience—and then answer whether, from his heart, he thought so young a girl's fancy for the first man (however good) she had met was likely to be lasting. She spoke with the greatest air of fairness, as for nearly two hours they discussed the matter ; and though he interrupted her again and again, she never once wavered, but took up her argument just where she had left off, with, not persistence, but rather a gentle utter persuasion of being in the right.

Altogether, when he rose to go, though Cust would hardly own it to himself, there was a feeling within him that though he would be sorry for his friend, still an engagement for a year or so, while she was at school, or

under masters' teaching, might be best for Mabel's own happiness—women were so fickle.

As Mrs. Langton held out her hand she again murmured low, tender thanks for all he had done for her ; but hesitatingly added it might perhaps be selfish to detain him now longer.

She broke off, confused. But Cust, who felt rather relieved, since some business really required him in London, readily answered that by next day he could finish all, although hardly in time to come out and tell her his final arrangements till late.

"In the evening then, after dinner. You could take a fly? And there is something also I would tell you——"

Madame again stopped, and turned away her head.

"You must tell me all you wish—I can go up to town by the early train on Sunday, but shall come back for the funeral."

"You intend, then, that people should



know you are my brother-in-law? How good! how kind!"

Madame's mind quickly grasped the advantage of position to herself, should the relationship (without details) be known. But Cust frowned.

"I hate making a nine days' wonder. Since the world believes I was unmarried, better let it think so still. The few neighbours in this out-of-the-world spot can suppose me to be only a friend; but Miss Langton—Mabel—may know the truth, and I shall tell Mrs. Lester?"

"Ah! you will tell Mrs. Lester?"

"I will. When does she arrive?"

"On Monday night; it was impossible sooner."

There was a touch of bitterness in her tone; in reality she had prevented Maud, by various pleas, from coming till the last moment.

When Richard Cust left the house, there was somehow an uneasy sense within him;

and yet he told himself it was ungentlemanly to suspect the poor woman. A little sharp and querulous she was, at times, like all weak things; but when a *man* interfered, so easily made submissive.

At that very moment she was looking after his tall figure receding down the drive.

“Ah! you and Mrs. Lester; if that is to be it, how I shall *ha-a-te* you both. You think me conquered, and your friend's marriage certain. Wait! It was foolish to anger you; the slow, quiet way is always safest—*but it shall never be!*”

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.











